

Summerblood

Malevolent Reverie

Star Wars - All Media Types / Star Wars Sequel Trilogy Complete



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Summary

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Description:

FBI detective Rey enters protective custody after a serial killer she's tracking stalks her to her home. She tries to distance herself from the case and soon finds a distraction in her neighbor's charming teenage son.

Chapter 1

Never in my life had I lived in a quiet cul de sac.

Bouncing around foster care didn't give me much opportunity, but after joining the FBI and going through the ranks and living alone—that didn't give me a chance, either. I'd move between apartments and men and—

Jesus. I'm already being a crybaby.

It's a beautiful house: white siding, blue shutters, and manicured lawn framing a big porch. I should enjoy it; the quick taste of normalcy, the peace and quiet. I'm here because I'm investigating and *he* knows who I am, so I'm a little hesitant to embrace the calm.

I stand outside, head tilted. There's a couple neighbors along the street, including some busybody mom and her teenager right next door. I'm supposed to be a writer for the *New York Times*, which makes zero fucking sense for someone in East Bumfuck Louisiana. They've all got that bizarre accent. Hick.

But it's my cover and I can't blow it. I'll have time to follow my guy without worrying about him finding me. He's been active in Alexandria, dumping bodies in Kisatchie National Forest, and I'm way down by the coast. Had to leave my assignment in Shreveport when he sent a letter.

I click my tongue. "Okay. Here we go."

...

My boss has the place outfitted with cameras and motion detection and shit. I've come the closest to finding the guy, who's been active for over a year and has a penchant for gutting women in their thirties.

I mean *gutting*. He spends an impressive amount of time ripping out the organs and playing around with the dead body, and we know from autopsies that he's a violent rapist to boot. He's strong. He's strangled women to death with his bare hands, or beats their skulls in, or—

I lean back from my laptop, closing my eyes, shuddering. I'm restricted to only a handful of days investigating because it's already getting to me. I've taken two miserable vacations where I could only think about finding him.

A dozen bodies is no joke. A dozen women, all mothers, all murdered in their own homes. He likes home invasion, just like the Golden State Killer.

But they found him. We'll find this guy, too.

My cell rings and I welcome the distraction. I'm dressed up in my usual stuff: a blouse, hair back, pants that are easy to run in. I'm not doing a good job blending with the locals.

"Rey." My boss, Han. "How's it going?"

“Fine. Haven’t gone to see the neighbors yet.”

“Yeah, my kid and my ex are there. Figured it’s easier for us to keep an eye on all three of you that way.”

I laugh a little. “So you doomed me to suburban mediocrity?”

Han laughs, too. He’s a nice guy: older, well into his fifties, and divorced from the next door neighbor, Leia. His kid is some basketball, football star, athlete, volunteering teenager. On track for Yale apparently. He’s going to be a doctor.

“Ben’s a good kid,” Han says for the hundredth time. “He’s usually out doing somethin’ for school but he’ll be happy to mow the lawn or clean the pool or whatever. He’s a good kid.”

“I won’t make your son my slave but thanks for the offer.”

We laugh again. Lapse into silence.

Han clears his throat. “Don’t do too much, Rey. We’ll find him. They found that prick in California.”

I nod along, tapping my pen on my desk, staring at the pictures of the mutilated bodies on my screen. I’m going to find him. The news calls him Mutilator for good reason, and sometimes pictures of the bodies leak online. I still don’t know who the fuck would want to see it.

Han hangs up to go follow some lead that will go nowhere. I change out of my work clothes into capris and a t-shirt, and kind of scowl at my reflection for a while. It’s so... suburban. All I need is a mini van and bob and I could be running PTA meetings and yelling at kids in fast food restaurants. It’s how I should look, though. Leia and Ben have no clue who I am or that I know Han and they *can’t* know any of that.

I amble around my empty house for another twenty minutes, bored shitless, and find the fridge is already full of food. I have a car on rental, too—mid size white Lexus, just like half the other cars on the block. It’s not a poor neighborhood, that’s for sure.

But I can’t go out and walk to the bar or just go for a walk at all. I’m more or less trapped in the house until the Mutilator is caught. He’s already made it clear that he knows who I am and what I look like and I was immediately moved into protective custody after the first letter. Lots of pictures, most from a distance, and one of the door to my apartment.

Now I’m just doomed to a life of boredom.

I plant some things around the house, like one of my small pistols under the kitchen counter and a couple knives in different rooms. He’ll try to corner me in the bedroom—that’s where he always strikes—so I hide a knife under the mattress and tape another under the side of my nightstand. I’m not helpless by any means, and I know how to incapacitate men twice my size, but I won’t take any risks, either.

After that I’m back to the tedium. I sit in the living room on my beige couch and sigh. I can’t keep poring over the file. It’s driving me fucking nuts.

The doorbell rings. My hand goes straight to my pistol, because old habits die hard. I hop up and shuffle to the door, peering through the eyehole to see a middle aged woman standing outside with a pan of brownies. It's Leia. Han showed me a couple pictures of her and said she's nosy.

She smiles when I open the door and I smile back. Good, I fit into the weird suburban mom look.

"Hello there—I'm Leia; I live right next door with my son, Ben." She hands me the pan and motions to her matching white house. "I just wanted to stop by to say hi and invite you over for dinner. It's exhausting moving. I know I wouldn't want to cook on the first day."

"I'm Rey," I manage somewhere in the middle. "Um... yeah, that's okay. Thanks so much for these; they look great."

People go visit each other when they're neighbors. Rey isn't my *real* name, either, just part of the cover. Should be safe enough.

I let her inside and she starts looking around, craning her neck to see into the living room and dining room. It's a really bland house. I didn't pick any of the décor but my apartment back in Shreveport wasn't that fancy, either. It slowly became more cluttered the longer I followed the case with the Mutilator, and I took my first vacation when Han saw the state of it.

"What do you do for work?" Leia calls. "Something local?"

"No, I'm actual freelance. I write a lot under a pseudonym for the *Times* and things like that."

"You must be very good! Such a lovely home you have."

Yeah, it's fucking peachy.

I find a spot for the brownies and grab my purse before we head out. There's an app on my phone that alerts if a window or door opens, and someone is constantly casing the neighborhood. It should put me at ease, but he's slipped through security systems and past dogs. He's frustratingly careful and intelligent, not the typical sloppy sadist who leaves a mess.

I'm pretty sure he's a young guy, probably white. He's strong. Must be big. Probably not married, no kids; I assume he's a violent psychopath and manages to hide it well. That could fit a lot of different men.

I clear my throat, smiling as I walk to the door. "Thanks for coming over and inviting me. It's so awkward coming to a new neighborhood."

Leia nods, bustling back to the front, eyes scanning the house. I'm not super sure what she's looking for but it feels less predatory and more nosy. Han would probably know if his ex was killing women.

Probably.

"You can come by whenever you'd like," she offers. 'I'm usually working but Ben is home from his summer camp up by Alexandria.' She puts a hand over her chest and closes her eyes.

“I was so terrified—it was so soon after that last girl was killed.”

“That must have been so upsetting!” I gasp.

Leia keeps prattling on about how scared she was that a serial killer strictly murdering women in their early thirties might have killed her seventeen year old son. I lock the front door and double check before following her the fifty or so feet to her identical house. She’s one of *those*. Something awful happens and she feels the need to make it about her.

Her house is air conditioned and nice and cool for a humid, sticky July in Louisiana. She leads me down the same hallway, to the same kitchen (with newer appliances) and goes to the oven to check on something inside. I sit at the island and murmur a thanks when she pours me a glass of white zin. I’m more of a whiskey girl, just because it fits the ‘lonely detective’ bill.

Leia shakes her head as she puts the bottle away. “Ben is independent, but I worry about him being alone. He tries to keep busy: volunteering, working, helping at the youth group. Have you been to the church in town? Very nice people. It’s not Catholic; they’re very progressive.”

“I’m not big into church, but thank you.” I sip my wine and hear voices outside. Laughing. “How long was Ben at camp?”

“Two weeks or so. He’s a counselor—loves the kids.”

Hm. I nod, mildly suspicious. Psychopaths hide in plain sight. They’re usually the best-adjusted person in the room.

Jesus, that’s not fair. I can’t suspect some teenager of *murder*—a teenager I haven’t even met. Maybe I should throw my laptop out the window and swear off this whole thing—

The glass door slides open and two very wet teenage boys laugh and push and stumble inside. Leia hisses at them to dry off first and one takes the threat seriously, shuffling out so fast I don’t get a good look, but the other one ignores her sharp rebuke, grinning, leaning on the counter.

He’s tall for seventeen, all crooked features in which I see hints of Han and Leia, and I know it’s got to be Ben. No shirt, because he’s a teenage boy and obviously just came back from swimming with his friend. Black hair is plastered back on his head and his ears stick right out. He’s laughing while Leia slaps him with a spatula and I double back, a little horrified I thought this nice kid could be a murderer.

She points to the door. “Get *out*, Ben! We have company and she doesn’t want to see you half goddamn naked!”

Ben seems to realize I’m there. He glances at me, then looks again and lingers. His eyes are dark and curious, and he just stares, licking his lips.

He stands up straighter. He’s completely posturing and I have to smile a little bit at it, sipping my wine and looking away toward the window over the sink. I’m not about to ogle a teenage boy, especially not my boss’s son. Ben’s not ugly or anything. I just—don’t ogle teenage boys, especially in front of their mothers. Or at all. Jesus.

Ben crosses his arms over his chest. “I’m allowed to be half naked in my own home, ma. Finn’s hungry and you know he gets pissy when he’s hungry.” He shuffles to his mother’s

side, directly in my line of sight. His back is broad. He's built less like a teenager and more like a linebacker. "So... what're you feeding us? And our neighbor?"

"Rey," I offer. He looks at me, eyebrows raised, and I raise mine back. "My name is Rey."

"Huh. Fancy name. You don't look like a Rey."

Leia slaps him with the spatula again and he sighs and saunters back outside to dry off the pool water. There are puddles all over the floor and I offer to clean them up while she's busy cooking.

"I'm so sorry," she says, genuinely mortified. "He's such an ass sometimes, just like his father."

I shrug and get down to my knees while I clean. Ben and the Finn kid are sitting outside at a table with an umbrella, laughing like hyenas at something on Ben's phone. It gives me flashbacks to the jock guys laughing at me; being in on some nasty joke about my torn clothes or dirty hair. Nowadays I fight back against bullies who are over the age of eighteen.

Leia bustles off to set the table, and the boys come back inside. Finn gives me a quick hi and a smile and exchanges a glance with Ben, kind of like 'not bad.' I'm in the best shape of my damn life, thanks very much.

Ben shuts the glass door and kneels to help me. He still hasn't found his way into a shirt but I'm pretty sure that's deliberate, and I can't say it's not *maybe* an ego boost. It's a weird feeling.

"Sorry," he says, gathering all the damp paper towels. He shrugs and gives me another lopsided smile and this time I can't even begin to deny that my heart skips a beat. "I was gonna come back but I didn't know mom would let you do it. It's just fucking water. It won't melt the floor."

"It's fine. No big deal."

He throws it in the trash and stands up, offering me his hand along the way. I take it, noting his palm is rough, then take a sharp breath, surprised by how he yanks me to my feet without a pause. Han said he's an athlete and it definitely shows. He's *big*. Not basketball-oriented, but that broad kind of football body, built for withstanding tackles.

Ben smiles again, and scoops up my glass of wine. He keeps his eyes on mine as he walks past me, drinking it in one gulp—confidence that seems well beyond his age. But I don't spend much time around teenage boys to know the difference between a weird look and a cocky golden boy.

I turn and watch him disappear down the hallway, frowning. One of those 'save the world' kids. He gets the arrogance from Han.

Chapter 2

“Finn, dear—when does your mom want you home?”

Dinner is lasagna; pretty good lasagna, and I’m almost done with my slice. The dining room is kind of quiet and our cutlery echoes in the cavernous space.

Ben found a shirt and the seat next to me. He’s kicking Finn under the table and laughing while he chews, black hair hanging down to his shoulders in a damp tangle. Leia sits at the head of the table and tries to tune them out.

Finn kicks Ben. “Eight. I can walk.”

“Ben and I can bring you.” Leia frowns and looks at me. “Well, maybe Ben should make sure you get home okay, Rey. I may stop in to see Finn’s mother, anyway—she has new living room furniture.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” I interject, covering my mouth while I chew. I shake my head and start to repeat myself but Ben’s voice cuts over mine.

“I’ve got lawns to mow tomorrow, so I can’t stay *too* long.” He smiles, sipping his drink with an innocent look on his face. “But I guess I can sacrifice a little beauty sleep.”

Finn snorts. “You *need* it, dude.”

He gets another kick under the table and Leia snaps at Ben to cut it out. I pick at my vegetables.

They have a dishwasher so my help with cleaning up is limited by technology. Still, I rinse the plates and chat with Leia a little about the neighborhood. Quiet, nice public school, but Ben is in some private Christian school. It’s nicer there.

She glances over her shoulder at Ben and Finn on the living room couch playing a video game. They’re into it like teenage boys are, standing and shouting at the screen until Ben chucks the controller. I’ve done that—with my N64, not a PS4. Am I getting old? I’m only thirty two but I feel fucking sixty.

“The girls don’t distract him,” Leia says, even though I didn’t ask. “There’s a dress code and it’s all nice families. Finn goes to the same school.”

I nod absentmindedly. Ben flops down on the couch, a big tangle of long limbs and hands he hadn’t grown into quite yet. I miss being young, but I never had the luxury of being carefree like that.

“It’s the breasts that distract them. None of the girls these days keep covered up, you know?”

Oh, we’re still on this. I keep nodding and passing her plates to put in the dishwasher. Ben’s doing something with someone. He doesn’t have that nervous virgin energy about him.

Jesus—why do I fucking care? Because his mother has deluded herself into thinking a teenage boy won't go hunting down porn on his own? That she thinks an expensive private school will protect him?

Blatant hypocrisy annoys me. That's why.

Leia collects Finn and shuffles him to her Lexus. She gives Ben instructions to make sure I'm home safe then go straight to bed after, because he's working tomorrow and he'll be tired if he's up all night. It's yard work, not brain surgery.

We stand on the porch until her car is around the corner. Cicadas and crickets chirp in the beat of silence that follows.

I start down the steps. "So can you mow *my* lawn?"

Ben follows, hands in his pockets. It's basketball shorts and a wife beater, and his hair is back in a bun. Someone should tell him he looks like an asshole.

"I can. But *will* I?"

"Oh my god, please don't hit me with dad jokes," I groan.

He laughs and shrugs, all of Han's casual charm with none of his constant exhaustion. Maybe Han was like this when he was a kid, before wasting half his life trying to hunt down serial killers. It's a draining job, and you never really escape from it.

Ben glances over his shoulder. "I can come over next week and do it. I can clean the pool, too. Do it all the time for Mrs. Raleigh down the street. I think she just wants to stare at my ass."

I cough and manage a strained laugh. Probably.

The porch light is on when we get to my house. My keys jingle as I open the door, a quick segway to third or fifth dates when I'd finally risk having sex. Usually I'd meet at hotels where there were more people around. I only let a few men come to my house.

Ben stays where he is, smiling again. I smile back as I shift into my house.

"I can come do the pool Friday," he offers. "I'm used to hopping fences."

"I bet you are." I glance back into the dark house. My spine prickles. "Whenever you have time is fine. I pay in food or cash."

His smile widens but he doesn't say anything. He gives me a short wave and wanders off back toward his own house, hands still in his pockets. I watch him until he goes in the front door.

Nice kid. His mother is oblivious, though: but she's also clearly never home.

It's a quiet night. I turn on all the lights and circle my new house with my hand on my pistol, concealed carry on the hip. The basement is dead bolted, windows protected by bars and Plexiglass, and I'm scared shitless of basements so I don't bother with it. There's cameras just like upstairs.

Still, I sleep with the bathroom light on and lock my bedroom door. I check the window before I crawl into bed, lying on my back and staring at the ceiling.

Then I get back up.

Just... one more glance over the file and I'll go to sleep. I have a weird suspicion about Ben and I just need to—compare. Just to see.

I flick on the office lights and open my laptop, resting my chin in my hand. The usual blood and guts pop up as I click around to the file with my personal notes and Han's additions, and I scroll through, running the similarities in my head. Young, male, charming.

Leia is never home, either. He could be doing *anything* and she's too oblivious to notice.

But I can't go drawing up a background check on a teenager without good reason. I frown and keep going through my profile: he's strong, quiet, blends in. Ben was up around Alexandria after the last murder at some summer camp. He could've—

Shame comes over me. I blink and lean back in my chair, a little repulsed by myself. What's wrong with me? Am I just looking for him everywhere? Am I that jaded from a year of tracking this guy?

I close my laptop and sit there in the dark for a while. My mind wanders to what he's doing right now: maybe sitting alone in the dark, too; maybe casing the next house he'll break into.

Maybe he's looking for me.

...

Another week soothes some of my paranoia. Ben spends most of his time out with his friends and comes home by nine or so every night. He's never stumbling or drunk or anything like that. I stop watching when I realize how creepy it is.

Leia pops over one more time for coffee. She travels. Lawyer. Hence why Ben is usually alone.

She sips. It's a nice warm day and we're out on the back deck watching my leaf-filled pool. Splashing from the other yard mingles with laughter. Finn is over again, like he always is, usually following Ben right off the bus after school. They spend half the day together in the same pattern: food, pool, more food, video games, with some laughing at their phones between.

I sort of listen to Leia. It feels like she wants me to tell her she's a good mother.

"I only worry about the youth group," she sighs, rolling her eyes. "Some of the girls there are so inappropriate and it's distracting for the boys. You know how men's eyes travel."

"I don't think seeing cleavage will make or break him."

Whoops. Leia gives me side eye and shrugs. He's always busy, whether it's getting up early for yard work with Finn or hanging out with Finn for most of the day. Sometimes he's alone. She shouldn't be so up his ass about it or he really *will* act out.

"Sorry," I mutter. "You just shouldn't worry. He's smart, and works hard."

She smiles and takes another sip. It's the ego boost she wanted, like his success is a reflection on her. *Of* her. That's even weirder.

I'm set free half an hour later when she takes her brownie pan back to her own house. I lock the door and lean against it, rolling my eyes. Han didn't tell me she was such a huge pain in the ass. She's not rude or anything, just... nosy.

A couple minutes pass before someone knocks on the door and starts ringing the bell. It makes me panic for a second but no one dings my phone to tell me there's an issue. It must be a neighbor.

I pad over, bare feet, and open up to find Ben outside—again without a shirt on. He casually walks into my house dripping pool water and points through the kitchen to the sliding glass door. I have to take a quick step back to keep from touching him by accident.

"Mom said the pool's dirty," he offers, already walking to the back. He turns and walks backwards, eyebrows raised. "You want me to clean it, right?"

What the fuck—what the hell?!

I'm a little miffed by the wet floor and only give him an irritated nod. He clicks his tongue and winks, loping out the back and jumping in the pool before I can blink. Jesus; he can't just walk through my fucking house like he owns the damn place!

The glass door slides open. Ben is dripping wet, black hair pushed back so I can see his ears.

"I'll clean the floor." He grins and slips back out. "It won't melt, right?"

"We'll see, I guess," I snap.

It doesn't bother him in the least. He jumps in the pool again and I'm left glaring at the water tracked to the door. Teenagers are the fucking worst.

No thanks to his goddamn mother for casually pointing out that my pool is dirty. She is a big pain in the ass; such a snotty busybody type. Sorry my fucking pool doesn't meet your standards, Princess.

I pace my kitchen, arms folded. A glance outside shows Ben swimming around using the skimmer for the leaves, oddly graceful for being such an enormous kid. He throws out the refuse on the lawn, which I honestly don't care about, and he climbs out of the deep end when he's done.

I've been staring. I blink when his dark eyes meet mine, and he smirks a little, lifting himself out with a strong push of his arms. His swim trunks are way too low on his hips. Talk about *distracting*.

"Oh my god," I mutter, quickly looking away. I shield my eyes and hide near the fridge, mortified. "I have to get the hell out of here before I commit a fucking felony."

I won't—I'm not an idiot. It's just hard being cooped up with nothing but my laptop and the TV to keep me company, and it's not like I can go out on a date. The faster we find the Mutilator the faster I can get the hell out of here and back to Shreveport.

The glass door opens. “Hey, you have any chlorine tabs? Like in a shed?”

I don’t look at him. “No. I haven’t gotten around to it.”

“Oh. Cool, I might get a brain eating amoeba from that, but... no big deal.” He laughs and pushes the door. I hear it grating. “Want me to check the shed anyway? Our old neighbors stockpiled that shit like they were getting ready for the apocalypse.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

I’m not looking but I can see his shadow come in the house. My heart pounds and I try for nonchalance instead of embarrassment. I’m not coming on to him or anything. My gaze just... wandered.

“Is it back by the trees?” he asks.

“I don’t know, honestly. I can just go get some tomorrow.”

He’s fucking incorrigible. Just please go find something else to do and quit dripping water in my house and walking around half naked.

“Eh, I’ll look.” Ben taps the door on his way back out. “Wanna come? You should know where the shed is.”

Space will be good. A big space.

He leads me out and shuts the door behind us, sealing in the freezing cold A/C. The pool is greenish but doesn’t have any more stuff floating around in it. Trails of dark water spots circle around where Ben wandered while he skimmed it.

There’s an obvious dilapidated shed off in the corner near the perimeter of the fence. I’m terrified for a second that he’s leading me there to make a move, but he’s a teenage boy, and Leia says he’s never had a girlfriend. Makes sense for how much he’s with Finn. Maybe he doesn’t like girls.

I cross my arms. “Did you really need my help finding that? This is going to come out of your paycheck.”

Ben shakes off like a dog, grinning, and I make the mistake of meeting his eyes again. He glances down and right back up because I’m wearing a v-neck and he’s a teenage boy.

“You’re always in your house,” he says. He yanks open the shed and stands by the door, hand on his hip. “You should get some sun every once in a while, Rey.”

“That’s Miss Niima to you.”

He presses his tongue to his inner cheek, studying me. His smile keeps growing.

“Okay, *Neem*.”

I roll my eyes and peer into the dark shed. There’s some old gardening tools, pots and spades, and a couple buckets in the back full of chlorine tabs. I’ve got to do something with the pH, too? I don’t remember. Pools are too much work.

It smells musty and damp. I’m drawn in, leaning to see better and assess how dangerous it might be. He could hide here—the Mutilator. I’d never see it coming. I should ask Han for

more cameras.

“Scared?”

I jump at the sound of Ben’s voice. He’s leaning on the door and chews his gum obnoxiously when I glare at him. He shrugs off it and sidles past me toward the back, grasping my upper arm along the way to keep me in place. I shiver and tighten my arms over my chest, unsettled out in the open.

Ben picks up two tabs, juggling them effortlessly for a second as he walks back toward me. He comes a hair too close and I awkwardly turn against the doorframe to let him pass.

He stops right in front of me. I push back until the wood digs into my spine, determined not to touch any part of his teenage boy body.

“You have to keep the pH right,” he says. His eyebrows draw together and he keeps chewing his gum, pretending he’s thinking hard. He leans on the opposite side of the doorframe and looks out at the pool. “I’ll come by and keep track, since you’re allergic to the sun or something.”

“I’m not allergic to the sun, I’m just busy doing things adults do.”

“Whatever you say, Neem. I think you’re a vampire. Finn thinks so too.”

I keep sidling until I’m out of the shed and back into the humid sunny afternoon. Ben follows, shutting the door and watching the pool like it might fly away.

It’s a huge relief to be out of the cramped dark space. I’m terrified of them.

“I’m not a vampire.” I dust myself off, irritated, realizing more and more that he’s just a run of the mill annoying teenager. “And don’t come running through my house again like that. Thanks.”

“My bad. Mom made it sound like you had a dead body floating around.”

Images flash behind my eyes that I quickly dissipate with a quick rub. Ben tosses one of the tabs in his palm and throws the other one across the lawn. It lands in the pool and he smiles, chewing. I try to rearrange my arms so he can’t see down my shirt.

“I’ll do the lawn this weekend.” He shrugs and squints at the pool, then throws the other tab. “Grass isn’t long enough yet. It’ll burn.”

“Thanks. Don’t bust into my house, please.”

“Can I if I clean the floor, because the look on your face was fucking priceless.”

“I’ll kick your ass.”

Ben bursts out laughing, shaking his head and heading for the pool. He walks backwards and smiles at me again, glancing over his shoulder once or twice to make sure he’s not about to eat shit.

“Whatever you say, Neem!” he calls.

“That’s not my fucking name you little prick!”

That makes him howl and bend over, wrapping his arms around his stomach. I'm annoyed but my stomach flutters because it gives me flashbacks to boys in elementary school tugging my ponytail to get my attention. He's teasing me.

Ben jumps in the pool again. I press my lips together, frustrated and confused, because for the first time ever I have to set an awkward boundary. He can't talk to me like I'm a sixteen year old girl. I'm the adult here. *I'm* the adult. He should be nervous around me.

But he's not, and I'm uncomfortably resisting the urge to smile. Boundaries, Rey. Boundaries.

Chapter 3

My weekend consists of studying gruesome pictures and writing out notes, pacing my office and drinking moscato. It's a typical weekend. I'm not big into going out or going to parties—or anything, really. Work absorbs me and I let it because I'm determined to get the filth off the streets.

The longer I work the Mutilator case, the more it intrudes on my life. Sometimes I have horrible nightmares where I'm chasing women with a knife, and I worry *he* put them there; like he's inserted in my brain. It's delusional as hell and I haven't told Han or anyone else about it. They'll pull me from the case completely and I'll never find him.

I sit by the window and chew my nails. I'm obsessed with this guy. It just got worse when I found the letter slipped under my door: handwritten, deliberately sloppy. I already pored over letters from different serial killers and none seemed to fit the bill—and he never sent letters. He only sent one, which is now in evidence: but I remember it.

I see you. :) I want to see your insides.

Short. Disturbing.

It's driving me fucking nuts. I want my apartment back. I have no idea why he singled me out, because I don't quite fit the profile. He likes killing mothers. I'm over thirty, but I'm not a mother, and not married.

My life has been totally upended by some psychopath with a violent streak who somehow manages to clean up behind himself. They never do when they rip people open and play with the body. Even the Golden State Killer was in and out, raping and slipping away, never lingering for too long. The others, Gacy, Fish, BTK; even Ted fucking Bundy—eventually they slipped up.

This guy will too. Unfortunately, like the others, he may rack up a high body count before that happens.

My doorbell rings. I frown and slip from my office, dressed again in jeans and a t-shirt, and pad downstairs to investigate.

I peer through the window alongside the door. Ben is there with his hands in his pockets, whistling and looking around while he waits. He's got a shirt on thank fuck; some old Ramones t-shirt.

I blink and look down. I'm wearing a Ramones t-shirt.

He gives me a big grin when I open the door. It's been a couple days since he fixed my pool, which is now blue instead of sickly green, and I've been waiting for him to mow my lawn. I smile back and stay in the doorway. No way is he coming in my house again. What if he finds the cameras?

“Hey Neem,” he says, snapping his gum. He gestures toward the back of the house with a wave. “Gonna go mow but you’ve got a lock on the fence.”

“Oh, shit. Hang on.”

I turn for my keys sitting in a bowl on a side table. Locking the gate won’t stop someone from just jumping over, but at least it’s an obstacle. Maybe the guy has a bum ankle.

I turn back, busy separating the keys, and bump right the fuck into Ben. He laughs while I curse up a storm and shove him back, just on instinct. *Jesus Christ*; what’s his fucking problem?!

“Stop doing that!” I snap. I don’t have my gun on me and I’m not super trigger-happy, but... “I’ll end up hurting you!”

“Stop doing that!” he mocks, high-pitched. He kicks my door shut and saunters into my house, straight through into the living room. “Nice place, Neem. Looks like a hotel.”

What the—

Furious, I storm after him, but he doesn’t seem to care. He keeps whistling while wandering around looking at my mantle and couch, and his whistle lilts and pauses when he comes to the bookshelf. He touches some of the bindings and casually tugs out my first-edition copy of *Persuasion* that I found at an estate sale. Yeah, first-edition. For ten bucks.

“Fancy,” Ben says. He flips it open. “This looks boring. We had to read that god awful *Pride and Prejudice* shit in class.”

I snatch it. He keeps smiling and chewing his gum as he wanders out into the hall, eyes scanning my walls and floor.

“I told you not to come in like this!” I shove the book back—then hesitate and carefully put it back—and stomp after him. “Go around the side or don’t come at all if you can’t be respectful.”

“Walls are sagging.”

He puts a hand out and draws his fingers along it, slowly walking into my kitchen. The glass door is shut and locked tight, blinds and curtains drawn, and I realize it looks like I’m a crazy shut-in. What else am I supposed to do? I can’t risk a serial killer peering into my house.

Ben turns in a circle in the kitchen. His hands are in his pockets and he’s slowly turning, looking up at the ceiling with a frown.

“Dad knows how to fix this stuff,” he says, wistful. He squints. “There’s cracks in the ceiling, too. How much did you pay for this place, Neem?”

I’m thrown off. Shit. Shit shit shit—

“Three... three hundred thousand?” I reply more as a question than an answer.

“Huh. Mom paid five hundred, I think.” Ben smiles down at me, shrugging. “Guess you got a discount because it’s falling apart.”

“Ha ha. Funny.”

He keeps smiling. Raises his eyebrows.

“Cool shirt. Are you stalking me?”

“No. You weren’t even around for the Ramones. You weren’t alive when they all died.”

Ben cocks his head, all smug teenage boy, just like the jocks from high school. They never paid much attention to me and it’s still oddly satisfying that he is. Oddly. And quietly. Not something I’m going to reflect on, but I’ll remember to ask Han if someone can tail me so I can go out.

“I didn’t have to be around to watch them croak to like their music, *Neem*.”

“Fine. Whatever.” I motion toward the glass door, sweeping with both hands. “Get out.”

“Do you like Queen?”

“Of course I like Queen, like everyone else who can hear.”

He leans on the island. “D’you like... Third Eye Blind?”

That’s a little more pointed. It’s not like they’re an underground band, but I’ve seen them about six times in concert and had a very embarrassing crush on Stephan Jenkins for a couple years. What? Sue me.

I cross my arms, narrowing my eyes. “Do *you* like Third Eye Blind?”

“I don’t know. *Do I?*”

Ben laughs when I roll my eyes and head for the sliding door. I unlock and drag it open, pointing irately for him to get out. This isn’t a social visit. I don’t do social visits with seventeen year old boys.

Thankfully he sees himself out. I follow because I have to, with my key to unlock the fence, and he waits for me at the bottom of the stairs. His dark eyes settle on the pool and he smiles wide.

“Looks good,” he says. He watches me come down the steps and shrugs off the side of the porch. “Blue.”

“Yeah, it does. Thanks.”

It’s hot as hell outside. I can’t wait to get back to my air conditioning and my office.

I hold the lock, fumbling a little because Ben is standing not a foot away from me, and he just keeps chewing his gum. Cicadas buzz from the woods. It’s that strange tense silence that always precedes the bad part of the horror movie, and I’m on high alert. What if this psychopath decides to kill a kid? What if he gets mad seeing Ben hanging around?

No. That’s stupid. Doesn’t fit the profile.

Ben slips out when I pull the lock free and I hurry back inside. I pull the door shut but leave it unlocked in case he needs to come in for water or something. His mother won’t be happy if he passes out in the heat.

The mower starts as I check the fridge for ice cubes and water. It's still awkwardly empty, a pitiful sign that I live alone and have no friends. I sigh and open up my grocery delivery app—maybe I'll make stir fry tonight and get wine drunk. I'm technically off-duty.

My fancy refrigerator has an ice machine and water dispenser. I take a glass myself and pace for a minute, between going upstairs to do more research and waiting for Ben to be done. Got to lock the fence. I also don't want him barging into my house and scaring the shit out of me.

I pace and pace—then lean on my tiptoes to look out the window.

His shirt is off *again*. It's ninety degrees out so it makes sense, but it's still weird and uncomfortable to see.

I set down my water and frown, leaning up higher, watching where he's walking. There's already a big chunk of the lawn mowed. He's obviously sweating and I'm sure he's going to jump in my pool when he's done, then try to bust into my house, then mock me when I tell him to get out.

Nice kid my ass. He's a teenage boy through and through, but that's okay, because he's a kid and should be a kid.

Still, I linger. I watch him for a long minute that turns into two and three minutes. His back is tan and defined and he's wearing underwear that I can see the black hem of above his shorts. Shoulders are broad. Black hair is tied back, and he's listening to music on those wireless ear buds. He's mouthing a song while he turns a corner to start on the last section of the lawn, and I keep staring, gaze roaming down his chest and his stomach—

I jerk back.

Okay. Okay. I rub my chest and glance at the stove, suddenly stricken with the realization that I've been ogling him for a good ten minutes. How?

I'm on the phone with Han two minutes later, curtains drawn again to keep my creepy pedophile eyes from drooling over a teenager. The ring tone drags and drags and I shudder. What's *wrong* with me?

"What's up?" he says when he picks up.

"Han—I need to go out. I'm getting fucking cabin fever."

He laughs. "Yeah?" There's a pause, fingers clicking on a keyboard. "We can tail you to buildings, but no one's going in. Good idea to bring your gun."

"No shit," I snap.

I'm repulsed by myself. I keep pacing and rubbing my chest. I've just got to go to a bar and find someone my age to talk to.

Han whistles, clicking his tongue. "Guess you do have cabin fever. Ben come do the lawn yet?"

Fuck. I hang up.

The mower goes quiet a couple minutes later. I throw back a glass of moscato and clench my jaw. It's not like I can't control myself, I just feel like he can see what I'm thinking, because I've never had a good poker face. He's a perceiving kid. Cocky and rude and perceiving.

The door slides open and he peers inside. He raises his eyebrows and gives me that same shit-eating grin.

"Permission to enter?"

"Not like you care—but come in."

Ben steps in, covered in sweat like he's from a cheap romance novel, and I scratch my neck and look up. The door slides shut and he helps himself to a glass in the cabinet.

"Hot out," he says.

"Yup."

"Are you even gonna use the swimming pool?"

I shrug, examining the ceiling. It really is cracked.

"Maybe."

Ben fills a glass with water, then another. He yawns and sets it in the dish washer. I hear him crack a bone somewhere in his body.

"You got your phone on you?" he asks.

"...No."

My eyes snap back to him as he crosses the five feet between us. He grabs me around the waist and twirls me around and I scream and kick my legs. He almost drops me and laughs hysterically while I flail and try jerking my elbow back into his ribs. Jesus—I don't want to hurt him but he needs to let go.

"You fucking—!" I can't turn in his arms and my back is pinned to his chest. He's carrying me to the door. "I'll fucking kill you!"

"You couldn't get away with it, Neem."

Ben wrestles me out the door, down the steps, and drops me on the grass. I roll over and lash out but he's seriously just a kid and I don't want to drop him.

"Cut it out!" I hiss. I roll quick to get up and he just gets his arms around my waist again. "I'm not fucking kidding!"

"I'm not fucking kidding!" he parrots in the same high-pitched voice. He keeps laughing and dragging me toward the pool. "I'll fucking kill you! Where'd you get such a fucking potty mouth, Neem?"

He's strong as all hell. I claw at his hands around my waist but it doesn't do much—the skin is thick and again, I don't want to leave any scars. He's throwing me in a pool, not throwing me down and raping me.

The edge comes quick. Ben makes a dramatic turn and releases, and I shriek as I fall ass-first into my freezing cold swimming pool.

I'm terrified for a split second. The chlorine hurts my eyes; it feels like I might drown. Walls close in. I let out a bubbly breath and claw for the surface, heart pounding in my ears as Ben jumps in somewhere beside me. I can't see him. I can't see him if he comes to kill me.

Ben grabs my arm and drags me up.

My head is spinning so fast that I paw for him, feet only brushing the bottom. He's *still* laughing. His hands are on my waist and he's twirling around into the deeper water, and my trembling hands on on his teenage boy shoulders.

I jerk back like he burned me, struggling to catch my breath. "Ben—put me *down*, you fucking—"

"Okay."

He drops me. I shriek as I plunge back into the cold water, just as disoriented and shocked as before, and grab his forearms when he pulls me up.

Ben gets his hands lower, settling on my hips. He's smirking while he watches me swearing and panting and I catch my weight on his chest. It's hard and ridiculously broad—he's really built like a linebacker. My legs are around his hips and I know I'm way too close to his crotch.

I glance at the fence separating my yard from Leia's. She can just peer over and see me swimming with her teenage son, and I'll go straight to jail. Goodbye badge, goodbye life, hello ten years in low security.

I swallow, pushing on his chest. "Seriously, your mother will kick my ass! Just—let go!"

"Let go, Ben!" His mimicry of my voice is terrible and I'm getting sick of it. He swims out into the deeper water, submerging us up to our mouths. 'Mom's out of town, Neem. We can swim around like a couple of fish.' He snorts, coughing on water. "Or a wet cat."

"I can swim fine, I just can't swim when I'm thrown in a fucking pool!"

His dark eyes are bright under the sun, black hair plastered back like it always is when he's swimming. He hums under the water and makes ripples.

"I've got youth group tonight," he says, rolling his eyes. "No time to do the people I want to do."

He lets a hand off my hip and I think I'm free, but he's just grabbing the edge of the pool. He pins me there with his hips, humming away like this is perfectly normal, and his other hand grasps my jaw. I blink and only manage a tiny gasp before he kisses me, right on the lips, and I taste chlorine and mint.

The shock of it has me spinning, but I manage to pull back, and Ben roughly pulls me in again. He kisses me and gets his tongue in my mouth in that overeager teenager way, and I keep blinking hard, hands still planted on his chest. His are closed and his fingers unfurl to cup the side of my face. Cicadas buzz. He's fucking kissing me.

I slap him as hard as I can across the face. Ben groans and his weight slips back, so I take the opportunity to scramble out of the pool. I drag myself up on the rough concrete, scraping my knees, and make a beeline for my house. I've never been so mortified in my life.

He laughs. "Come on, Neem!" Water sloshes—he's following me. "Come on, don't run away. I'm just kidding around."

This time I really will drop him. I throw open the glass door and when I sense him coming up behind me, I whirl around and punch him in the stomach.

Ben coughs, doubling over, slumping against the doorframe. For a split second I remember he's a kid, and maybe he just kissed me because he's a stupid kid, but I'm not going to tolerate being pinned like an animal. He knows better than to fucking kiss a grown woman.

I stare at him as I slip inside and slam the door shut. I lock it, draw the blinds, pull the curtains, and run straight upstairs to my bathroom.

I'm disgusted and terrified and trying to ignore the thrilling undercurrent of taboo and being caught. He's sloppy and overeager, seventeen, and he wants to kiss me. Out in the open. His lips were soft, too; wet from the pool, salty from sweat, and really, really soft.

Someone might've seen on the fucking cameras.

Terrified, I go through my house, still soaking wet, and twist around all the cameras I find so they don't catch me drooling over a teenager. I don't stop until I'm sure I have them all, and Han calls me, but I go to the bathroom to strip off my wet clothes and change into something dry.

I'm going out. I'm so going out and getting very, very drunk.

Chapter 4

Okay, okay. I can't get drunk. It's easier to think once I'm at the bar surrounded by people my age who aren't dripping pool water and kissing me.

Jesus—I'm a fucking pedophile. I'm going to be on Dateline and Han is going to kick my ass.

He calls again, probably wondering why I ran out of my house and flipped the cameras around. I answer with a full 'hello?' and hope it's not because he saw me making out with his son.

"Christ, Niima!" he snaps. "What the hell?!"

"Sorry. I needed a drink."

"Well, what the fuck?! I had to scramble someone over there to follow you and we were worried he was—" Han hesitates, stifling his anger. "Last I saw Ben was there. He do anything stupid?"

"No—no. I'm just stressed. It's hard staying in that fucking house all day."

Han grunts in agreement. "Fine. Have your drink and go the hell home before that psychopath figures out where you are. *Don't* do that again, detective."

He hangs up.

I put my phone away and nurse my whiskey sour. This is a small place with only a couple other losers like me scattered around. Fitting: the morose detective drinking alone while the bartender talks to someone more interesting. I'll just have one or two.

I'm trying *not* to think of my boss's son kissing me in my pool, but it's pretty much the only thing on my mind. Why? I don't know, probably because he's a stupid teenage boy who I shouldn't be staring at.

I look around the dark bar at the small selection of middle-aged men. There's no one here who might be even slightly tolerable to have sex with. That won't suddenly make this go away, either. Now I'm a pedophile. I'll add that to my list for the shrink.

Soon my whiskey sour runs out. I order another and take small sips to make it last. One more and I'll be tipsy, which can either make me quickly get drunk or feel perfectly fine. Too risky. Plus, it's the middle of the day and I shouldn't be binge-drinking.

"You need a straw?"

The bartender is looking at me while he cleans a glass. He's definitely older than me but actually, not ugly, which I didn't notice before. I pause, drinking in his sharp jaw and curly black hair, and cock my head. Huh. He's kind of hot.

I shrug. "No, I like the experience of sipping."

“Ah.” He smiles and puts the glass away. “Well, then sip away, missus...?”

“Rey—and I’m a miss. You flatter me too much, Mister...?”

“Dameron. Poe.”

We chat a little. He’s a veteran back from Iraq with a bum leg and bought the bar off an old family friend. He gets increasingly attractive on my third whiskey sour and when the bar clears out, he’s drinking with me. I’m laughing for the first time in ages.

“You didn’t!”

“Yup. Sure did.” Poe puts back a shot of tequila and grits his teeth. His dark eyes are glassy. “Jumped out of a plane and got bit by a shark. Navy never saw anything like it, but I got medical discharge.”

“That’s *insane*.” I cover my mouth, trying not to laugh. “I’m sorry, that’s just insane.”

“Tell me.” He rolls his eyes and laughs, too. He’s an easy laugh and has cute dimples. “Big ass shark, at least—took my calf clean off before I got to shore. Fucking prick.”

We both keep laughing and I somehow don’t let it slip that I’m an undercover detective. But I’m a sucker for men with big dark eyes and dark hair in plenty of other ways, and I end up on the other side of the bar—bent over it.

Poe has a condom and he’s as drunk as I am so it doesn’t go that well. We still laugh it off and manage to *get* off after we go to his office and use the chair. I’m pretty desperate to forget about kissing a teenage boy but my thoughts still drift back.

His lips were soft. His laugh is, too.

“Fuck, Rey—*holy shit*.”

I come back to Poe’s hands on me, arms wrapped around my back. I’m exhausted and half-asleep on his chest, legs hanging over the back of the chair. Somehow, I don’t feel any better.

He’s a nice guy, though. Attentive, attractive. Asked six times if I really wanted to, even though two drunk people alone will almost always wind up fucking. I had an orgasm so I have no real complaints.

I swallow and lean back so I’m upright in his lap. Poe smiles in that drowsy well-fucked way and kisses me. Time for me to flee before he wants to cuddle.

“Thanks,” I say as I stand. I wince. “Uh... I mean—that was good.”

He laughs and throws the condom out, standing to button his jeans. I’ve never banged a guy with a prosthetic leg so that’s one for the books.

“Yeah, Jesus.” Poe puts his shirt on over all tan rippled muscles and sighs. “Been a while for me. Hard with the leg, but not so hard when I’m drunk.”

“Me too. I work a lot.”

“Yeah? What do you do?”

Shit. I lamely tell him I'm a writer and he offers to put in a word with some local paper. I fix my shirt and thank him as I leave the office. Nice to have sex with an adult man, but I'm still thinking about that infuriating fucking kid next door.

We get our things and go to the door. Poe gives me his number and I give him mine, because it's good to have a fling when I'm bored out of my fucking mind.

He frowns, touching the handle. "Huh. Unlocked. I usually lock it when the last patron leaves." Then he bursts out laughing and shakes his head. "Would've been fucked up if someone came in and saw us."

I laugh as we step out into the balmy summer night. There's no way. Sure I heard a creak when I was riding Poe but it's an old building. I'm just being paranoid.

Poe is as clingy as I feared. He texts me when I get home courtesy of the car sent to tail me. His apartment is walking distance so I don't have to worry much about him crashing or something.

I send him a 'great thanks night' as I head into the house. My cameras are all fixed after my hysteria this afternoon and they did a sweep to make sure the coast was clear. I'm back where I should be—trapped in tedium with a healthy sprinkle of terror.

After a quick shower to wash away the shame of a quickie with a bartender I knew for all of three hours, I'm ready for bed.

Ready, but too obsessed with the case to go quite yet. So I sit at the laptop and mess around for a while to decompress. Pretty fucked up, but I have to check. I have to know if there's something I missed.

I nod off to images of mutilated bodies when I'm in bed under the covers. Maybe Poe is a serial killer.

In the morning I find another text from my one-night stand. I groan as I get up to brush my teeth and wait a bit before texting back a 'good morning' with nothing else. He's nice. He must be lonely after coming back from deployment so I'll be nice. Civic duty.

He's setting up dinner plans when my doorbell rings. I stop dead in the middle of brushing because I know exactly who it is. My heart skips a beat.

Nervous, I rinse and put on a bra under my ratty pajamas before I go downstairs. Look ugly, Rey, and don't show your nipples. Teenage boys love that shit. They'll masturbate to whatever weird shit they see.

I take a deep breath before I open the door.

Ben is there; dressed in a blue shirt and shorts. His hands are in his pockets and for a split second I think I see his jaw clenching behind his smile.

"Late night?" he asks.

“Can I help you?”

He sighs and rolls his neck. “Yeah, I guess. Sorry about yesterday. I won’t do it again—and you owe me money.”

“Really?” I frown, cocking my head. “I think it should be free, for the pain and suffering.”

“Ha ha, very funny, Neem.”

“I know, I’m a barrel of laughs. Stay here.”

I shut the door behind me and lock it for good measure before I go searching for my purse. It’s forty bucks or something and I curse when I find my wallet empty. Shit. I used a lot last night drinking with Poe.

Ben won’t let me live this down. Shit.

He’s turned watching the street when I come back. He smiles and raises his eyebrows, expectant.

“I have to run to the bank,” I admit, hovering behind my door.

“Oh man.” Ben shakes his head and puts his hands on either side of the frame, leaning over. He lowers his voice. “I require immediate payment, Miss Niima. But we might be able to work out...” His dark eyes roam down the scrap of my clothes he can see. “Something else.”

I slam the door in his face.

Upstairs I change into jeans and a blouse appropriate for running out to the ATM. I’m a little flustered by his implication of exchanging sex for mowing my lawn but like with everything else in my life, I ignore it. I spritz on body spray and go back to the door.

Ben has seated himself in one of the porch chairs. He hops up as I shut and lock my front door.

“I’ll come with,” he says. “Youth group was the pits last night and Carly is taking over. I hate kids.”

“Me too.”

“Yeah, you don’t have that maternal vibe. No offense.”

“No offense, but I’m a frigid bitch?”

He blinks as we get to my car. I give him an imploring look over the hood as I unlock it with my keys, just so he can’t slip inside.

“I didn’t say that.” Ben presses the button on the door so it opens and he’s in my car before I can stop him. “You’re really tense today, Neem. I already told you I’m sorry about yesterday.”

“Don’t—bring that up!” I snap, slamming my door shut. I toss the keys in the cup holder and press the engine button. “Never bring that up, okay?!”

“Jesus. Fine.”

We're quiet as I pull out of the driveway. Carting around a teenage boy who kissed me seems like—and is—a very bad idea. Han will have questions, as he should, like any other father would.

Ben yawns and stretches, idly playing with his hair. He gazed out the windshield at the traffic lights.

“So who did you fuck last night?”

I slam on my brakes so hard that we both fly into our seatbelts. Ben catches himself on the dash and swears and I lean over to grab his shirt in both hands. I drag him over the console and catch a satisfied smirk.

“You—!” I hiss. “Stop! Just leave me alone!”

“Inquiring minds want to know, Neem.” His eyes roam to my mouth. “And you’ve got a hickey on your neck. Not a hard equation to solve.”

My cheeks burn. I shove Ben back into his seat and fling down the sun visor to look. Sure enough, Poe was a little too eager near the bottom of my throat. Son of a *bitch*.

I groan, covering my face with both hands. My phone vibrates; it’s another text from Poe and I’m going to lose my shit if he doesn’t cool his jets.

Ben casually picks up my phone. “Poe Dameron, huh? Dude who owns that bar in the city?” He puckers his lips and nods. “You could’ve done worse, Neem. I mean, not worse than a big ass hickey on your neck, but it’s not like he’s butt ugly.”

“God. Just... go haunt a fucking house, Ben.”

“Can’t. Need my money first.”

I snatch my phone and text Poe about the hickey. Ben goes back to lounging in his seat, yawning.

“He good?” he asks. “Looks like he’s got a big dick, y’know?”

Poe apologizes pretty quickly. I roll my eyes and stow my phone in my pocket to keep it away from Ben before driving again. The ATM isn’t far off. I’ll give this asshole his money and go hide in my room.

I’m just being provoked. If I keep giving in to being provoked, then he knows it works.

We make it to the ATM and I take out sixty bucks. I shove it in Ben’s hands and he gasps, sarcastic.

“Well you didn’t have to pay me *that* much without a dance,” he says. “I’ll give you a special rate. We can break these babies up into singles.”

“Jesus, you’re annoying.”

He laughs, putting the money away in his wallet. “Seriously, you don’t owe me that much, and I know you won’t want me coming over anymore.”

I shouldn’t want him to, no. But I do.

I shrug as I turn a corner. "It's fine. If you kiss me again I'll kick your ass, though." My gaze flickers to him smiling at me. "Seriously. I *can* kick your ass."

"Yeah? You look like you weigh eighty pounds soaking wet."

"Big deal. Winning a fight is about more than brute strength, kid. Lots of other dynamics."

Ben asks me to share, so I do. I'm into martial arts and self defense so I pull over to expand upon what I'm saying and he sits and listens for whatever reason. He nods along, watching me and laughing every once in while. He really does have a nice laugh.

And it's nice to talk to someone after weeks of being alone in the house. Even talking to Poe was nice but Ben is better at listening, never interjecting with his own story but asking more about what I'm saying. Teenage boys aren't usually good at that.

He reclines his seat. "Alright, so show me."

"Hell no. You'll make it weird."

Ben snorts, shaking his head. He has twenty dollars still out on the dashboard.

"No. I won't." He looks at me and smiles, chewing his gum. "And if I do, you can just kick my ass. Right?"

"...Fine, but we're doing it outside. And asking your mother first."

"She's never home anyway. She won't give a shit. Come by Friday night and we can in my dad's old gym." Ben furrows his brow and unlocks his phone. "Or, Thursday. I volunteer Friday at the soup kitchen and the animal shelter Saturday."

It's *very* stupid. Han will ask. I pull away from the curb and chew my lower lip, heart pounding. I've always loved doing dangerous things.

"Fine. Wear a cup."

Chapter 5

Of all the stupid things I've done, wrestling a teenage boy when his mother isn't home has to be the stupidest. Stupider than tracking serial killers.

Han doesn't have much to say because I lie and say Leia asked me to watch him. He's seventeen years old and built like a linebacker; he doesn't need a fucking babysitter. But it aligns with her helicopter parenting so I'm not scrutinized when I walk over Thursday afternoon.

Ben opens the door in basketball shorts and a sleeveless jersey. He snaps his gum.

"Hickey looks better, Neem."

"Shut up."

He grins and steps back to let me in, dressed in leggings and a long sweater that covers my ass. Leia's house is just as palatial as I remember, cool from the air conditioning. It's a big cavern.

"The gym is in the basement," Ben calls as he leads me toward it. 'Mom has all her yoga shit set up down there now but I found the old wrestling mat.' He opens the door and smacks his gum, smirking. "Didn't find a cup, so aim high."

I roll my eyes. "Don't do anything weird."

"I would *never* do anything weird."

He flicks on the light and closes the door behind us. I'm doing this, and I know exactly why I'm doing this.

We come down the stairs to a remodeled basement, complete with carpet and a wide screen TV. Ben leads me through the sitting area with an old green couch and some bean bag chairs to another room.

Old gym equipment sits scattered around, dusty from misuse. A sad, faint scent of must hangs in the air, like Han's cologne gone rotten. They must avoid this room like the plague. Han says Ben is a good kid but I'm not so sure Ben feels so chummy toward his father.

He ties back his black hair. "Okay, so—show me all this Bruce Lee shit, Neem."

I raise an eyebrow, dropping my bag to the floor. "I'm no Bruce Lee, but I'll be happy to kick your ass. Come at me whenever you're ready, champ."

Ben hesitates at the other end of the blue mat. He's all gangly big teenage boy and I've knocked down much bigger men. I nod and motion for him to come.

My phone rings.

"Shit," I mutter. I wave my hand and turn to get it. "Hang on, I think it's Poe."

Ben grabs me around the middle before I reach my phone. He's fucking heavy but overeager as hell, trying to lift me up and turn, so I stomp on his foot and drive my elbow into his ribs three times in quick succession.

He holds on. Sometimes they do.

I'm not going to jerk my head back and break his nose; it's not a real fight. I twist my ankle around his calf and pull to throw him off balance, making him stagger forward far enough for me to get an arm around his neck. From there it's all physics.

I brace my feet and haul him over my shoulder. Gravity does most of the work in dropping him to the mat, but pain jolts up from my elbow to my shoulder, a grim reminder that I'm not as flexible as I used to be. I wince and hiss, stumbling a step.

Ben bursts out laughing after he slams into the floor, breathless, groaning between laughs. He grimaces and rolls on his side, and I check my phone. Little prick. These aren't prison rules.

"Holy shit!" he laughs. "Where'd you learn that again?"

"The Acad—the self-defense... academy." I scroll through my messages and text Poe a good morning. "You wouldn't know it."

I toss my phone to my bag when I'm done and Ben grabs me again. Same result: I hit him hard in the gut until he weakens and throw him around like a ragdoll. He's all brute strength with no finesse, and people with finesse are the ones who win fights.

But he's determined to pin me. He doesn't seem to be getting mad that I keep wiping the floor with him, but laughs every time and runs a hand through his hair, throat bobbing, dark eyes bright and excited. Not that I'm paying attention, but he's definitely wearing a cup. Any normal teenage boy would be...

Ugh. I shudder and sit on the edge of the mat for a drink of water, and Ben sits beside me. He's sweaty and out of breath and guzzles half his bottle.

"Okay," he says, "fine. You can kick my ass."

"Thank you." I twist the cap on and stretch out my legs. "Good workout, though. I've been cooped up inside so long; I needed to stretch."

"Well you must've gotten a pretty good workout fucking that bartender, right?"

I glance at Ben, unnerved by the accusatory jab, but he's not looking at me. He studies his empty bottle, watching droplets racing along the ribbed interior like it's a Pollock painting he can't figure out.

I slap my hands on my knees and heave a sigh, aiming for levity. "I'm going home to shower and take a nap. It's not easy getting old."

"One more," he says. He nudges me with his elbow and smiles. "Then I'll let you go."

"Your funeral."

He laughs and shrugs as we stand up. I do one more quick stretch and shake out my hands, then motion for him to come at me.

And he does, faster than I can blink. I'm tired but he's clearly been pulling his punches—he trips me, offsetting my feet as he twists around my back like a snake. An arm loops around my throat, lightly, just enough pressure to let me know it's there, and the other secures around my hips.

It's hard to do anything without hips. I grit my teeth try lifting a foot to stomp but he digs in his elbow to keep my leg from moving. His arm tightens like a warning and I cough and shove my ass into his groin to push him off. He has me in a chokehold. He has me in a *chokehold*.

Doesn't work. Ben holds his stance like he's done this a hundred times before and every time I struggle he just locks me in a little bit tighter. It's like I'm in one of those Chinese finger traps or quick sand or...

I huff, reddening at unmistakable hard pressure against my ass. I'm on tip toes and jerk hard toward the elbow near my cheek, trying to force him to twist, but he doesn't budge. He meets each sharp movement with equal strength until I realize I'm entirely trapped.

Ben's bare arm brushes my hip bones. He's breathing on the side of my head, gently, not at all winded from restraining me—and I realize with a prickle down my spine that he's murmuring. *Shh. Shh.* My heart patters faster, ears ringing. *Shh.*

"What d'you think, Rey?" he whispers in my hair. Fingers creep under the hem of my leggings and his voice deepens. "Am I a better workout than Poe Dameron?"

Then he lets go.

I stagger forward, gasping, catching myself on the cool wall. My pulse flutters and I stare at the floor, stunned and a little scared. Holy shit. What the fuck?

Ben picks up my bag and slaps my ass. "Told you I'd let you go, didn't I? Now c'mon, I'm fucking hungry."

Holy *shit*. I turn and see him smiling at me from the door, leaning on it and smacking a new piece of gum in his mouth. He opens it and just stands there, and I stare at him in rude shock. What the hell was *that*?

His dark eyes trail me but I have a hard time meeting them. I sidle past Ben into the sitting area and practically run upstairs.

Teenage boys are stupid and take things too far. It wasn't like Ben could—or would—actually hurt me. It's a good learning experience: don't put women in chokeholds when you're 'wrestling' them. Or ever.

The basement door closes behind me. I swallow, rubbing my throat and shaking my head.

"Ben," I croak, "you shouldn't do that to people. You can hurt them."

"Huh? It was just a headlock, Neem."

"Well that can go south really fast and you don't want to accidentally... hurt someone. You don't know how to do it right."

He laughs. My bag drops to the floor.

"You banged up my nuts pretty good. All our kids are gonna come out with three heads." Ben shuffles past me to the freezer, pulling his shirt off over his head. "You're just mad that I won."

"You didn't win," I snap, competitive as ever.

He drops his shirt on the floor and shoots me an incredulous glance over his sweaty shoulder. Win? He didn't win. I pinned him without headlocks!

"Oh, okay," he says, nodding, scrunching his face up. He paws through the freezer and tosses out two boxes of pizza rolls. "Pretty sure I won."

God he's an *ass*.

I shake my head. "Whatever. I'm going home; I need to wash off the gross teenage *boy*."

"Use the one in my room." Ben motions to the two boxes of pizza rolls as the freezer slowly shuts, eyebrows raised. "I'm making you a sumptuous supper, Neem."

"Sumptuous?"

"You like that? Found that baby in my SAT book. Now let me show you where you can take a *sumptuous* shower and wash off the..."

"Repugnant."

"*Delectable* scent of the teenage boy who pinned you."

I'm less afraid and more irritated now: he's such a cocky asshole, and he's going to hurt someone. I snap that at him while he leads me around the corner and up the stairs, bag slung over his shoulder again. He just laughs and insists he pinned me.

We walk down a quiet hallway to a room on the end, and I'm still nagging him.

"It's not a pin if I wasn't pinned," I say.

"Uh... yeah it is."

Ben's bedroom is rumpled teenage boy disarray; all posters and green sheets and random pieces of paper scattered around his desk. He's messy. Of course.

I step over a pair of jeans. "Look it up in the dictionary! Look up the definition of pinned!" I glare at his broad back as he leads me into the bathroom. "You goddamn kids always have your fucking iApples and shit, so look it up and read it out loud."

I'm hardly inside before Ben pivots and slams the door shut behind me. My eyes bug as his very warm body presses against mine, hand on the door to hold it closed, and he's got that shitty smirk again.

"Did you let Poe Dameron pin you?" he asks.

"I—That's—" My cheeks burn and I huff and puff. "*You*. The nerve! How *dare* you—!"

"It's just a question. You seem like you like being on top."

I slap him across the face.

A horrified gasp leaves my mouth before my hand falls back to my side. *Jesus Christ*—slapping him for kissing me is one thing but—oh my god.

Ben's tongue presses inside his cheek and he shivers, smiling. He chews his lower lip and studies me for a minute like he's deciding if he wants to slap me, too.

"Yeah," he says, "that's what I figured."

I shake my head but he kisses me anyway, hard and punishing, teeth scraping mine. Ben shoves me into the door and groans so deep that I feel it in my bones, and pretty soon I'm pawing at him, too, fingers tangled in his thick hair.

His mouth tastes like the peppermint gum he's chewing and his tongue is kind of thick and big, which leads me to think about how big his dick might be. I don't have to wonder too much, though: I can feel it rubbing against my stomach through his thin shorts and my bulky sweater that was *supposed* to keep him at bay. This is stupid—this is so stupid—

I shake my head and yank back. "Okay. Okay, I need to go."

Ben doesn't hesitate in moving on to kissing my neck. He's biting and pushing me up the door, big hands fumbling to get my legs around his hips.

Fuck. I squirm as he gets one thigh up and his very hard, very real cock pushes between my legs, and my mind goes right down the gutter to how big it definitely is. He takes a sharp breath and rolls his hips, thumping me against the door. Holy *shit* he's strong. What the fuck.

But I need to be the adult here and pump the brakes. It's not too late to turn back, and I need to stop him before we reach that point. Or before *I* do.

"Stop... stop." I push his shoulders, shivering. "Ben, you have to stop."

He grunts, but when I shift my hips and push again, he lets me down from the door.

I avoid his eyes. I'm dizzy and really turned on and Ben is the simplest and most tempting solution to that problem. He runs a hand through his hair and palms the door handle, breathless like I am.

"Shampoo and shit is in the shower. Oh—hang on."

He reaches past me through the curtain and comes away holding... a flashlight? He opens the top and shows me the inside and I realize too late that it's something for him to masturbate with.

"Jesus *Christ*, Ben!" I hiss, shielding my eyes.

"What? You wanna use it?" He pushes it at me and i recoil like it's venomous. "Stick your fingers in it. It feels like a real vagina, y'know. Science."

"Oh my god, get that fucking monstrosity away from me before I lose my shit!"

"C'mon. Touch it—I named her Roxanne." Ben follows me when I stumble into the shower, shrieking. "*Roooooxanne*. You don't have to put on the red light. C'mon Neem, don't you like The Police?"

I bump hard into the wall, rattling shampoo bottles and shaving cream, then I slap it out of his hand. He bursts out laughing and shuts the curtain, leaving me there to shower around the horrible thing.

I *should* leave. I turn on the shower and shiver in the cold spray, sobered by it. I should leave.

But I don't. I scrub off the sweat from throwing Ben around and wash my hair for good measure, then fold the dirty towel to clean it at home. It feels rude to make him wash it. It's not like we slept together and he's dealing with the... consequences.

Muttering, I pack the towel in my bag after I change into another pair of leggings and a loose t-shirt. I avoid looking in any cabinets or drawers on my way out and hurry downstairs to *flee*.

"That was fast."

I turn and bump into Ben's bare chest. He's damp and smells like fruity shampoo, black hair slicked back. Must've showered while I was showering.

He's cradling a literal bowl of pizza rolls. It tilts in a way that's supposed to be inviting but I wave a hand and shake my head. Hard pass. I'll probably be nauseous all night if I eat one of them.

Ben nods toward the living room. "Got that *Ghost Brothers* show on. Funny shit, but we can watch whatever you want."

"I'm going home. It's been a long day."

He snorts. "Yeah? Tell that to my—"

"Your nuts; I know. I know your testicles are suffering."

"Were." Ben grins and chews and I redden. "I'll be back to square one if your nipples keep poking through your shirt like that."

Son of a bitch. I look down and see nothing is showing but Ben gets a good laugh out of freaking me out. He dances away when I slap up his bicep once or twice.

"So you want something else?" he calls from the kitchen. "Preferably frozen. I'm lazy and I only cook for girls who put out."

"I'm okay, just water is fine."

The TV flickers in the living room. It's quiet and still, eerie for a house in the middle of the suburbs and as inviting as the catacombs. I sit on the couch and watch a group of young guys running around in the dark, your typical ghost hunting show. Shivering, I draw up the blanket over my front and hunker down.

Ben hops over the back of the couch. It bounces from his weight, pizza rolls shuffling in the big mixing bowl. He hands me a bottle of water.

"Agua, m'lady."

I cringe, taking a long drink. "Yikes. Don't."

He laughs and shrugs, pawing at the blanket to draw it over his lap. The sun is setting and darkness swallows our sleepy suburban neighborhood.

About ten minutes pass before Ben starts pawing at me again. His hand moves under the blanket up my thigh and I hiss, batting it away. His pinky brushes between my legs as he digs his fingers into the soft flesh of my thigh and pulls.

“Nice leggings, Neem,” he says.

“God you’re incorrigible.” I rub my eyes and slap his hand away again. “Ben.”

He dips his head and kisses my neck, bearing his weight toward me and pulling my leg until I have to turn to adjust. It happens quick and I feel slow. I’m drowsy from spending the whole day wrestling him.

We fall lengthwise on the couch, limbs tangling up in a chaotic mess that puts Ben behind me. He loops an arm around my middle, forearm brushing my belly, holding me as he settles my ass in his crotch.

I huff, reddening. He’s hard. Of course he’s hard, and he’s shoving it against my ass like he wants an invitation.

A soft groan muffles in my hair as I squirm in his arms. This is *ridiculous*. He’s warm and way too strong for a seventeen year old and his fingers are tracing the hem of my leggings. This is ridiculous.

“Ben.” I swallow a lump in my throat. “Ben.”

He dips his middle finger under my leggings, brushing my hip bone, cupping it in his huge hand. I shiver and heat creeps up the small of my back, unbidden. He’s warm. Smells like gum. Shampoo.

Ben drapes over my back, lips at my ear like someone might hear. He hugs me to his chest, whispering, deep voice wavering from restraint.

“I wanna be inside you.”

My heart jumps in my throat and he mumbles it again and it’s like he’s reaching in my gut and twisting it in his fist. *I wanna be inside you*. So simple. A very human request layered with something darker.

I want to see your insides.

Trembling, I push at his hand on my hip. “I have to go.” I *really* have to go.

“Yeah? Do you?”

I’m going to throw up. I nod fast and must fight hard enough that he realizes I’m not playing hard to get. Ben lets me go and sits up to watch me stumble around the edge of the couch, clutching my head as a loop of gore and death plays inside my eyelids.

I’m such a piece of shit—I’m in witness protection on taxpayer dollars and fooling around with my boss’s teenage son like it’s a fucking vacation. I deserve to have my guts ripped out. What the hell is wrong with me? Have I always been a piece of shit?

Ben follows, panicking. “I’m sorry, Rey. Are you okay? You can lie down in the guest room—”

“Fine,” I lie in a sharp rebuke. “Gotta go home.”

The room spins, snarling my tenuous grasp on reality around the unwitting teenage boy trying to help. He catches me when I trip and I mutter that I just need to go home, and I cling to him, afraid I’ll be swept away if I let go—or throw up.

The hundred different ways I’ve read that letter replay in my head: *I see you. I see you. I see you. I wanna see your insides.* I’m going to faint. I’m going to honest to god faint.

I shudder, tongue thick. “I’m gonna faint.”

I don’t hear Ben’s response, but my eyes roll back and his voice roars in my ears.

He catches me—I hope.

Chapter 6

The gentle buzz of my cell phone on a hard surface wakes me up. I can tell by the number of vibrations that it's Poe *again* and I groan as I come to consciousness, rubbing my face, writhing in an unfamiliar bed. What the fuck?

I'm worried I'm in Poe's apartment for a second but my confusion doesn't last long, instead twisting into terror. I'm in *Ben's bed*.

"*FUCK!*" I hiss. I throw back the scratchy worn sheets and sit up so fast that my head spins. "Shit—*shit!*"

Worse; this is way worse. Poe is clingy but he's at least my fucking age. All I remember is sitting in the living room and I hope I wasn't dumb enough to...

Groaning, I paw for my phone and answer the call without checking the name.

"Niima? Everything okay?"

Things get worse. My eyes widen at the sound of Han's voice and I look around Ben's empty bedroom in a guilty panic. I didn't fuck him. I'm still dressed and I'd have at least some sensation of it. It's okay. All I did was fall asleep here.

"Y... Yeah?" I croak.

"Didn't see you go home last night. Ben behaving?"

The bedroom door opens on cue and said teenager pokes his head in. He smiles at me, now wearing a sleeveless jersey that's stretched out from years of use. I stare as Ben slips through the door and realize I need to get off the phone, *now*.

"He's fine," I squeak. "I'll call you back, okay?"

Han can't know I'm in his son's bedroom and Ben can't know I'm on the phone with his father. I shake my head as Ben approaches and he makes a motion near his ear—who are you talking to?

Han huffs. "Well, we've got a problem: another dead body, and it's not too far from you."

Shit. I make threatening gestures trying to make Ben stay away but he just mocks me. Another death—this is a conversation I need to have but I'm too nauseous to get up, and fucking Ben isn't about to back off.

"Want me to check it out?" I ask. My stomach lurches but I scramble out of the bed, dodging Ben's long arms.

"Nah, probably not safe if the Mutilator is so close. Lay low and I'll send you info later today."

Han finally releases me from the conversation. I whirl around and stab Ben between his pecs with my middle finger, but he just grins and chews his gum. As always, nothing bothers

him.

“You!” I snap.

“Me.” He grabs my wrist and tugs me toward him, leaning in. “Who was that?”

“My boss. I have work to do back home, so if you don’t mind.”

Ben pouts as he pushes me into the wall. My cheeks burn and I grunt, scrabbling at his hips and twisting away from his mouth on my neck. God. I kind of want him to pin me like he did yesterday.

“But I made breakfast,” he mumbles, petulant. Stubble scratches my skin and I shiver. ‘And I let you sleep in here alone last night.’ He shoves harder, obviously trying to make me aware of his dick hard against my lower belly. Impossible to miss. “How about we pick up where we left off?”

There’s no off switch on this kid. I’m delirious from fainting the night before and my heart pounds with excitement—he really wants *me*, for whatever reason. It’s a weird powerful feeling to be wanted by someone in such a physical way.

Poe is a lonely guy but he doesn’t want to rip me limb from limb. Ben has that hungry way about him and it’s a dizzying high that he’s turned that hunger on me, and he’s pawing at my clothes like a crazed animal. He *wants* me.

I push his hips. “Let me—let me brush my teeth.”

I’ll do that. I’ll brush my teeth and get a grip and leave. I need to see a doctor about the fainting and Han is sending over important documents. Another girl is dead. I need to do my job.

Ben pauses before he lets me go. He runs a hand through his hair and slaps my ass.

It’s slightly easier to think when the bathroom door closes. I pace, combing my hair back, brushing my teeth like I wanted to, and glaring at my reflection. Come on, Rey. He’s seventeen. He’s your boss’s son. Go back out, tell him off, and go home.

I suck in a deep breath. I can do this. God willing. I’ve done harder things. Walking away from a teenage boy hellbent on sticking his dick in me should be easy.

I open the bedroom door and see him hovering near the end of his bed, hands in his basketball short pockets. Ben glances up, offering a crooked smile full of confidence a teenage boy shouldn’t have. He looks good, arms on full display from the baggy shirt, black hair a mop like it always is.

We stare at each other for a long minute, silent. All I have to do is walk past him to the door.

“Breakfast?” he asks.

Pale sunlight slants across the cold hardwood floor, casting shadows as my bare feet patter quickly toward him. I leap on Ben like the predator I am and he catches me like I knew he would, and our teeth scrape as I grab his face in my hands and kiss him.

He stumbles and groans like he's relieved. We twist and fall over the end of the bed in a heap and I run my fingers through his thick hair like I've wanted to since the day I saw it soaked in pool water.

My heart races a mile a minute. Ben is a rough kisser and I taste blood before he dips back to my throat, hungrily biting, setting my nerves alight with fear and excitement. I've never wanted to fuck someone so badly in my life, and I hurry to help him out of his shirt, raking my nails down his chest. Holy *shit*.

"Holy *shit*," I mutter out loud.

Ben leans up on his knees, stretching past me, opening a drawer. Crinkling—a condom, thank god—and he goes back to yanking my shorts down to my ankles. I don't even care if they come off.

I press my fingers into the muscles across his back, rolling as he pushes down his shorts. His skin is hot and smooth and I shiver as his bare stomach brushes mine. He's moving as fast as I hoped he would, not lingering or feigning emotion or anything like that.

Ben kisses a sloppy path down my collarbone to my chest, clenching the condom in his fist next to my head. He gropes boobs like a teenage boy, squeezing and massaging like he can't believe they're real, putting his mouth on them and sucking. It's fine. I just don't want him to linger—or talk.

Dark eyes watch me, hooded and hungry. I swallow and decide to look at the ceiling.

"You've done this, right?" I ask, wincing.

He laughs in the middle of mouthing my nipple and it makes a pleasant vibration. There's a wet pop.

"Uh... yeah." Ben kicks off his shorts and laughs again as he comes up to kiss my neck. "Have you?"

"I'm *thirty-two*." It's supposed to make him look like a dumbass but I just groan, thinking about the fifteen years between us. "Jesus Christ. When do you turn eighteen? Please tell me it's soon."

He leans on his knees, tearing open the condom with his teeth. I glance at his dick and redden. I should go. What the hell am I doing? Is this a felony yet?

"Come on, Neem—the age difference is half the fun." Ben raises his eyebrows and arches over me again, pressing his forehead to mine. I feel his very condom-less cock prodding me. "Don't you think?"

"Ben—" My breath catches as he pushes, kissing down my cheek. Holy *shit*, I cannot fuck him without a condom, birth control or not. "Jesus—*Ben*—"

Warm breath tickles my ear and I whimper, opening my legs as he keeps pressing in. God it feels good. I've never had sex without a condom and I'm so buzzed from the taboo and hormones that I dig my nails in his hips and push him along.

"What?" he breathes. He's inside me now, unmistakably, penetrating skin-to-skin. "Isn't this what you want?"

Yes. I bite my lower lip, eyes rolling back. I'm not quite there yet but I also don't want to spend too long on foreplay and risk someone catching us.

Ben drops the condom and commits to the risky unprotected sex that I, the adult, should stop. He's too young to get the consequences, even if I'd rather die than have a baby with a teenage boy. I probably wouldn't even share it if... that happened.

He kisses my jaw, huffing, just grabbing my hip and piling in the inches. There isn't much finesse to it.

"Fuck—" His big body shudders and he bites at my neck like he's trying to distract himself. "I'm gonna come. Soon. I'm gonna come."

Figures. Usually it's annoying when men announce how close they are but the way Ben mumbles it is a little... panicked? Embarrassed? I have a wave of that maternal protective thing and just shrug, squirming under his weight.

"It's okay." I hesitate, hands on his hips, feeling him resisting the obvious urge to pound me into his mattress. "Just pull out."

"Fuck, you're so soft," he grunts. He buries his face in my neck and the urge seems to overtake him as he gives a couple deep, staggered thrusts. My request is ignored. "I wanna come inside you."

"Ben."

"Feels so good—I'm gonna come inside you."

As promised, Ben climaxes not two seconds later, shoving his cock as deep as he can. He groans and bucks and I feel the twitch before the foreign warm rush of his cum emptying inside me. His whole body shivers and he kisses my cheek over and over like he's apologizing and I glare over his shoulder.

But he keeps going, still fucking me like he never came at all. His thrusts get longer and less rushed and I feel his cum leaking from my body every time he plunges in, like a reminder that I'm doing something really sick and really hot. His headboard bangs rhythmically off the wall until he reaches up to hold it in place and we both laugh a little.

"I wanna fuck you in the pool next," he breathes, already planning ahead.

"Outside is a—" My heels push down his calves as I find the right angle to rub against his pelvis. Fuck. "It's a bad idea."

"No one can see under the water, Neem. I'll fuck you in the corner near the shed—" Ben groans, mouthing my shoulder. "I wanna fuck you in the shed, too. From behind. Bend you over and fuck you in a bathing suit."

"Yeah, okay, just—don't stop. Stay like that."

He's at least obedient. I grab his shoulder blades and squirm into his thrusts, teetering over the edge then coming, gasping and writhing. *Fuck*. I'm coming on a teenage boy's dick, and it feels incredible.

Ben doesn't take long to follow. He empties inside me again but I'm too satiated to care, embracing gently as he grunts and slowly pumps his hips. Goosebumps bloom down his biceps and I trace them with my fingertips while he finishes, shivering, lips roaming across my skin before he's done.

It's easy to forget how old he is for a split second. He heaves that relieved sigh men always do and settles his weight, lazily kissing my neck. Cum leaks down to the bed spread.

"Shit, Rey." Ben rolls off me to his back and rubs his face with both hands, giving another long breath and a laugh. "Wow."

I peel myself out of his bed as quick as I can. "Don't say 'wow'; that makes it worse."

"Did you come? It got tighter—"

I shut myself in his bathroom and immediately get into the shower. The blast of cold water shocks my hot skin but I force myself to stay underneath the spray, shivering miserably. You dumbass. You absolute *dumbass*.

Ben doesn't bug me while I wash off his sweat and cum with all the fervor of someone who just committed a serious crime. The age of consent is seventeen but that doesn't make it any less gross to fuck a teenage boy in high school.

I scrub and scrub and the water helps hide my tears. I'm seriously fucked up.

It's still sinking in when I leave the bathroom with freshly washed hair and the same dirty clothes. Ben hasn't dressed all the way, only in the shorts and no shirt, and he's on his phone for a second before looking up at me. He breaks into a smirk.

I head straight for the door. "Okay, well—have a good weekend."

He follows. He shuts the door with one hand when I open it and kisses me when I turn to snap at him. I jerk back like he stung me, then I'm kissing him back, tasting peppermint and heat.

Ben rests his forehead on mine and I have to look into his dark eyes. I stare and notice the easy confidence is gone, replaced by something... colder.

He smiles. "I'm not done with you yet."

It's simple to tell him to piss off, but I just nod instead, relegated to my fate. Okay. That's reasonable.

My phone is tossed across the bed when Ben bends me over it. I think someone is calling but I'm a little distracted by the aching pleasure of him penetrating me, big hands grabbing my ass. He fucks me hard enough that I forget the call and get lost in the sensations and sounds of him instead.

I close my eyes and listen to him panting my name. At least he's wearing a condom.

Chapter 7

It's easy slipping away once Ben falls asleep—which happens immediately after the second round. I try to tuck him in and wince while I do it, fretting a second too long over fixing his hair. I'm making it weirder and way worse than it already is.

Sore and a little nauseous, I rush to get dressed and hurry back to my own house. I let Han know I'm going out to the drug store and shower once more before I do. I'll just buy all the Plan B I can find. All of it.

An undercover agent follows me to the drug store but not inside, thank god. My hands tremble as I fumble in my purse for my wallet, stumbling through the door and muttering an apology when I bump into someone. Give me *all* the Plan B. Mix that shit into a protein shake. Inject it into my uterus.

"Rey?"

I stop dead in the middle of the family planning aisle when I hear Poe call me name. Stiffening, I turn and see him wave from the other end, holding a red basket over his arm filled with random shit.

Well, fuck. He'll be wondering why I'm buying Plan B when we haven't had sex in over a week.

I try to smile. "H... heeeey, you."

Poe laughs and shakes his head as he approaches. I try to turn like I'm checking out tampons, not the emergency contraception. Son of a bitch.

"I called earlier." He tilts his head, eyeing the condoms and lube and crap. "Were you busy?"

"Uh...." Come on, Agent Asshole. 'Yeah—Yeah.' I snatch a box of Plan B and rattle it, pretending to be frustrated. "My friend sent me out to get this. Some guy. Can't be too careful, right?"

Poe frowns. "The abortion pill?"

"It's not actually abortion," I snip, automatically correcting him. 'It stops pregnancy from ever happening. But... sure, abortion pill.' I stuff the thick plastic case under my arm and clear my throat. "Slept with some random guy; not someone you want to have a baby with."

"Right, right."

Seems like he's buying it but I can't be sure. I rearrange the awful box and its huge security case.

"So, dinner?" I squeak. "I'm around tonight if you want to go."

He brightens. "Yeah? I can ask Cindy to close up tonight—how about eight?"

I have no idea what I'm doing. I've never been between two men in my life and I get a weird feeling I'm cheating on one of them or both of them at the same time.

But I *really* need to push away the whole Ben thing and Poe is an age-appropriate distraction. We agree to meet at an Italian place in town and he kisses my cheek before he leaves.

Christ. I rush to the counter, pay for my fifty dollar mistake, and book it out to my car. I'm shaking again as I turn the key in the ignition and almost back into a woman walking to her own car. She flips me off, rightfully so. I wish she'd punch me.

There are new gruesome pictures waiting for me on my laptop at home. I take the Plan B and groan at the sight of another poor woman flayed like a deer. Blood, guts; whole nine yards. Married mother of two who didn't live more than twenty minutes from me.

But it's a welcome distraction from Ben and Poe. One is appropriate to date but I'm not at all interested, while the other is utterly inappropriate to date, but I can't seem to stay away. Conundrum for the foolish.

Han wants to know if I have any insight but I can't pick out anything useful. Same tactics, never deviating from the course he's planned or the victims he wants: home invasion, rape, mother. Dumped her in Kisatchie not two days before they found her.

Must be a bitch carrying a hundred and eighty pound corpse outside and loading it into a car. Takes a lot of strength to move a dead body but he wants the privacy while he guts them and plays with the organs.

Nothing new to report. I rub my eyes and lean back in my chair, shuddering. Unlucky thirteen.

...

Dinner with Poe is largely uneventful. It's a nice outdoor restaurant and packed with people, humid enough that I wish I were inside. The food is delicious and so is the wine, and both keep me from thinking about poor Ben.

He's probably confused and upset. I nod along with a story Poe is telling me and swirl my red, watching the legs run down the edges of the glass. Poor kid.

"Written anything interesting recently, Rey?"

I blink, thrown off for a second by the question. Written?

Oh, right. I'm a writer.

"No, not much." I shrug and polish off my wine. "It's been a slow couple weeks."

"Well that poor woman just died; you could maybe write an article about that. Horrible as it would be. I'm not a journalist, though."

"Maybe."

A refreshing cool breeze wafts through the seating area, ruffling my tight ponytail. Wonder what he's thinking about right now. I hope he's okay—that he went to whatever volunteer work or random thing he was supposed to tonight.

Lights dance on the glass as I keep turning it. It's a beautiful night and Poe is a nice guy. Why can't I stop thinking about Ben?

"You live in that cul de sac, right?"

I glance up and nod. Poe nods back, chewing and patting his mouth with a napkin. He's wearing a dress shirt that he really didn't have to wear but I can still appreciate the effort.

"Sometimes I hear things at the bar," he continues. A smile plays on his lips. "There's some weird shit going on there, y'know. Ever met that kid Ben Solo?"

Holy shit. I nod faster, setting down my wine glass. The waiter refills and I thank him but I'm fully invested in Poe. What about Ben? What does he know?

Poe leans forward. "Well, a couple of the soccer moms who live there come into the bar every other weekend or whatever. I've heard one or two of them talking a little too loud about him... *visiting*."

"Visiting?" I echo.

"Yep." He makes an obscene gesture with two hands and my stomach flips. "*Visiting*."

First I'm angry and humiliated, like Poe knows I just slept with the kid earlier that day. So Ben gets around the whole neighborhood? Am I just another bored soccer mom to him?

Then as I chug my wine and glare over Poe's shoulder at the string lights along the fence, I remember that Ben is *seventeen*. A kid. He shouldn't be sleeping with anyone, much less the neighborhood full of women in their mid-30s. Never would've guessed it.

Poe picks up on my annoyance. He tries to smile and shrugs.

"Sorry—it's just one of those small town things. Kid is lucky if you ask me."

I slam down my glass. "He's a teenage boy, not a vibrator with legs. What would you say if he was a girl and sleeping with a bunch of horny old dads?"

"...I mean, that's different."

Christ. The waiter passes by with our bill and I snatch it from his hands, stick my credit card in, hand it back. I mutter an apology for being rude but I can't help it: I'm fucking furious. Ben is sleeping with half the neighborhood—*maybe*—and I felt bad for him.

I still should feel bad. He's a kid. He doesn't look or act like one but maybe I'm just trying to make myself feel better for sleeping with him.

When the check comes back I excuse myself and rush to my car, not bothering to kiss Poe goodnight or anything. He calls after me but I don't give a shit. I have to talk to this little asshole and we need to get a couple things straight. I'm not part of his *harem*.

One part of my brain screams at me that he's just a kid and the other is fragile and possessive, offended that he had the gall to sleep with anyone except me. I pile into my SUV and peel out into the night, furious. I'm not some stupid, bored soccer mom he can fuck and throw away.

The undercover car moves off as I pull into Leia's driveway. I try not to let my stiff walking betray my anger but my heels clack loud on the driveway in a decidedly unhappy way.

If Ben is with someone else *right now*—

I knock on the front door. Somewhere inside the television is playing but I don't see any lights on, and I wonder if he's just gone to bed already. His mom won't be home until Monday. Maybe he's bored.

Then I hear shuffling and the door opens, swinging inward, and I instinctively start hissing.

"*You*—! How many women in this neighborhood have... have you..."

The rage fizzles out when I make out his face in the darkness. Ben is hurriedly wiping his cheeks to hide the tears but he can't hide how puffy his eyes are or the pitiful sniffles every time he takes a breath. He's in the same clothes from this morning.

My accusatory finger slowly falls to my side. What am I doing? What's happening to me?

Ben breaks into a smile and laughs. "What? I'm just watching *Wall-E*. Fucks me up every time." He keeps smiling for a second until his lower lip trembles, then he looks down and away. "What do you want? Round two?"

"Poe told me..." I swallow and peer over my shoulder. "Poe told me... Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine. I'm just watching *Wall-E* and drinking Gatorade, Neem. Have to recover from fucking you earlier." He hesitates, then moves aside. "I guess we can do it again if you want but I'm tired, so..."

I take a step back. "No, it's okay. Sorry."

Crying men freak me out. Crying *people* freak me out. I'm eager to get away from this and the crying teenage boy I definitely had a hand in upsetting.

Ben nods, dark eyes vacant. "Alright. Thanks for stopping by to check on me."

"Sure, okay." I step back again. "Have a good night. Thanks for... earlier."

"Yup."

The door closes. I stare at it for a long minute and turn to walk away, because I should go home. He could just be sad about the movie. I've seen it before, and when it seems like *Wall-E* is dead...

I stop on the last step. Come on, Rey. Clean up the mess you made. Don't be like the other women who probably rush him out the door before their husbands come home. He probably just wants someone to stay.

When I knock again Ben comes to the door a little quicker. He seems surprised but moves aside.

I walk into the claustrophobic darkness and hug him around the waist once the door shuts behind me. He's warm; really warm, like he's been under a blanket. I hope he isn't sick.

Ben wraps his arms around me in turn, shivering. "I'm not really watching *Wall-E*."

"I figured."

He buries his face in my neck. "I'm watching *Coco*."

I laugh a little and shake my head, trying to avoid the tears coming up in *my* eyes. I think I really fucked up.

But at least I'm here. I follow Ben out to the living room where he's set up with blankets and the movie, clinging to that. At least I felt guilty and came back to comfort him as much as I can. He's young. He'll get over it in a couple days.

We sit, then he lies down and puts his head in my lap. I tentatively run my fingers through his hair, only relaxing when he sighs, and rest my head on the back of the couch. Ben plays the movie, thankfully not talking about his feelings or crying.

I stare at the ceiling. I've always been bad at sticking around after. Maybe now is the time to start.

Chapter 8

There's a very heavy teenage boy lying on top of me when I wake up in the middle of the night on Leia's couch. I'm wedged into the side of it, legs spread around Ben's hips, one arm around his back and the other dangling off the edge of the couch. He's heavy.

I blink a couple times in the darkness, getting my bearings. We're swaddled in a blanket together and he's hot and sticky from sweat. Thunder rumbles beyond the window and rain drums on the pane—didn't know it was supposed to storm tonight.

His messy black hair tickles under my jaw. I realize he's kissing me, then realize he has my blouse open and is gently sucking my nipple in his warm mouth. Rhythmic. Confused, I grunt and blink harder, squirming. What's he doing?

Ben's lips come free with a wet pop. "Shh, shh. It's okay." His big body shuffles upward and the couch creaks. He breathes in my hair. "It's okay."

Pressure, pushing—I whimper and dig my nails into his broad back as Ben penetrates me. He's fucking me, and I'm drowsy and dazed and not completely ready, but somehow I *am*. He's been touching me while I was asleep and my jeans are hanging somewhere down near my ankles.

"Ben," I breathe, now grabbing his shoulder blades with both hands. "Ben—"

"It's okay." His voice is deep and even; gentle, like he's talking to a kitten. His hips shift between my thighs, warm skin brushing skin, burying his cock up to the hilt. 'I'm not gonna hurt you—just wanna be inside you again.' Ben kisses the crook of my neck, shivering. "It's okay."

The way he has me pinned makes it impossible to kick him off. I hide my face in his shoulder and cling to him instead, heart fluttering. Does this count as—is he—

No, he's a kid. Not a bad kid, either. I'm awake and I would've if he had taken the two seconds to ask first.

I groan, trying to distract myself from the uncomfortable reality of Ben fucking me on his mother's couch while I'm half-asleep. He's a teenager, overeager and excited. He doesn't mean any harm. Rape is all about power and control.

"Don't you have a condom?" I mumble.

Ben has a slight tremor, maybe from how much he's restraining himself. He draws back and piles in slowly, stretching anxious tight muscle in hesitating thrusts. He's trying to keep from coming and if he fucking comes inside me again...

"Yeah, but then I can't feel you," he mumbles back, petulant. He kisses my temple and smooths a hand up my breast to my throat. "And I'm closer to you this way."

"Bullshit."

He laughs, breathless, fingers curling around my throat. It might be a little threatening.

“Well I’ve never done it without a condom. Feels good—soft and warm. Feels different when I come, too.” He squeezes my throat lightly and I get the feeling he chokes a lot of the women he sleeps with. “I like feeling my cum inside you. Do you like it?”

Maybe. Doesn’t make it okay.

I huff and shrug, trying to avoid the question. Ben keeps pushing my throat and lifts his head from my neck, dark eyes staring down at me, vacant.

His jaw tightens. He’s squeezing harder and my ears ring, black spots blooming on the periphery. Now he’s really choking me and still fucking me, rougher, annoyed. It’s kind of hot.

“Don’t you like how it feels, Rey?” he repeats.

I’m tempted to not respond at all. Most men I sleep with are like Poe—lukewarm, boring. Ben is straight up choking me and I have to admit, I don’t hate it.

He searches my face, and his expression contorts into deeper anger.

“Fine,” he snaps.

Ben’s weight is suddenly gone. I blink in surprise as he stands, pulling up his shorts, and storms past me out into the kitchen. What the f—

Dazed, I slowly sit up on the couch and try to fix my jeans, wincing, sore from our latest encounter. What the hell did I do? He’s so touchy.

I get up and pad out to the kitchen, buttoning up my blouse and fixing my bra. Ben is sitting at the island glaring out the window and doesn’t budge when I take a seat beside him. I really don’t know what he’s so pissed about. I’m being pretty cool about everything.

Men are simple: they like sex and hate talking. Being a prototypical man, Ben should *especially* like sex and hate talking. Hasn’t he slept with a bunch of women my age, anyway? Does he want to talk to *them*?

I glance at his face and do a double-take when I see he’s crying again. I’m lost.

“...Ben,” I attempt.

“What?” he retorts, voice cracking. He does his best to give me a cold glare but it fades into a trembling lower lip. He snuffles and looks away.

Hesitant, I touch his back. He doesn’t shrug me off so I try scratching lightly, roaming across trembling muscles and bone. He hunches his shoulders, tears glimmering in the blue light of early dawn. What did I do? He started it in the first place.

We don’t say anything for a while, just watch the storm raging outside. I scratch Ben’s back and wrack my head for ways to make him feel better.

“That’s what *everybody* wants.”

His voice is low, soft. It’s odd coming from a hulking man like him. Sad. I don’t ask what he means but wait for him to decide to talk. No use in pressing him for answers.

Ben takes another minute to collect himself before he speaks again. He wipes his face with his forearm.

“Everybody wants me to hurt them,” he continues. More sniffles. He looks down at his hands in his lap. “I did it with Mrs. Waal first and she always asked me to pretend to...” He pauses, taking a shuddering breath. “Rape her. I didn’t really want to, but I liked her.”

Jesus *Christ*. I wince, suddenly feeling like I shouldn’t be touching him at all. It’s bad enough sleeping with a teenage boy but asking him to pretend to do *that* is even worse. That’s what consenting adult men are for—men who can emotionally digest and understand what they’re doing.

Ben lapses into silence. He looks out the window again, eyes distant.

“I never wanted to hurt anyone—but now it’s like that’s the only thing I know how to do.”

My spine prickles. Where have I heard that before? How many serial killers and rapists and child molesters have said something to me of that effect?

But this is all fully consensual. Kind of. Ben is a teenager and they’re adult women imposing a common but complicated fantasy on him, but it isn’t like he’s really raping anyone. He clearly doesn’t want to hurt people at all and is just an emotional kid tangled up in adult problems.

The world is going to chew Ben up and spit him out. He’s going to spend his whole life trying to find someone to fill a void, and if he doesn’t fill it, he’s going to keep relying on unhealthy coping mechanisms and toxic people along the way.

It’s weird sitting beside someone on the tip of the scale. He can go either way.

I touch his wrist in his lap and he immediately turns it over to take my hand. My heart skips a beat at how blatantly needy it is and I realize I’m holding a very fragile thing in my hands. I shouldn’t. I’m the last person who should be in charge of something fragile, especially something like *this*.

“It’s okay,” I say after a beat. I rest my head on his arm and he rests his cheek on my head. “I’m sorry, Ben—but it’s going to be okay. What they want isn’t bad, it’s just a lot to handle emotionally, and they shouldn’t impose it on you.”

He nods, studying my fingers. I resist the urge to rip my hand free and run for the hills.

“Is it okay to like it?” he asks.

“Yeah, as long as you’re not actually... y’know.” I shrug. “It’s really common but people don’t like to admit it. It doesn’t make you a bad person: fictional things don’t reflect reality.”

“It’s the only way I’ve ever done it.” Ben takes a shuddering breath like he’s going to cry again. He squeezes my hand. “Then they always make me leave after and I feel like I don’t have anyone to talk to, and I get so confused about it.”

“You shouldn’t do something if you don’t like the way it makes you feel.”

My thoughts wander to Mrs. Waal, a woman my age who lives a couple houses down. I know her. She doesn’t look like the type of sleep with a teenage boy and involve him in

confusing rape fantasies but... Maybe I'll stop by for a visit.

I chew inside my cheek, gazing out the window at the rain lashing the trees. It's easy to forget Ben is a kid. I do all the time.

I'm not better than Mrs. Waal or anyone else who slept with him. I want to ask exactly how many but it seems like an invasion of privacy, and I should be protecting Ben, not possessively picking him apart. I want to know, though. Make a list.

But I'll wait until he offers the names to me of his own accord. He's beside himself, confused and scared, and now is really not the time to get jealous.

I clear my throat. "And just so you know: women not wanting you to... *finish* inside them isn't an insult or rejection. Pregnancy is a concern. Major concern."

"You don't want to have a baby with me?"

I stiffen at the hurt in his voice, surprised by it. Uh... uh oh. I was hoping that would be an obvious no.

But when I pull back to look up I find Ben grinning and he laughs when I slap his arm. He wipes his eyes, hopping down and following me from the room when I storm out. As always he's bounced back quickly, but I know a rebound isn't far behind.

"Ass!" I snap.

"C'mon, Neem—between my part time job and your bullshit writing gig we can make it work. I'll drop out of school and be a stay-at-home dad—"

"My job isn't bullshit!"

"I don't mind being a trophy husband and we both know I'm the looker between the two of us."

Fuck. I'm going home.

I snatch my purse off the floor and bump into Ben as soon as I turn. He grabs me around my middle and I'm dragged flush against him, puffing and protesting.

"Glad you're feeling better," I hiss, "but I'm going home."

"It's like three in the morning. Might as well sleepover again."

"*Ben—!*"

He throws me over his shoulder and slaps my ass. I dangle across his back, hissing and spitting and demanding he put me down, but I'm carried upstairs to his messy-ass bedroom anyway.

Ben drops me unceremoniously onto his bed. I bounce half a foot in the air, scrambling back, but he seizes my ankles and drags me to the end.

"Don't you take birth control?" he asks, making short work of my jeans.

"I have an implant—but that doesn't guarantee—"

He yanks my pants off and throws them into some dark corner of his bedroom. I plant a foot on his stomach as he leans over me, obviously going to take my shirt off next, and he pauses with his hands on either side of my head.

I chew my lower lip, studying Ben's face. He raises his eyebrows like he doesn't get my trepidation.

"Maybe you should just go to sleep," I suggest.

"Maybe."

A long arm slides under my back and lifts me to his chest. I suck in a sharp breath as Ben crawls into bed, carrying me up toward the pillows before he lets go. He rolls on top of me, pulling the blanket along so we're cocooned together.

I'm only given a second or two reprieve before he's trying to fuck me again, pushing down his shorts and yanking my panties. I'm restrained in the blanket, pinned underneath him as he struggles closer, warm breath on my neck. My heart hammers.

"I really like you, Rey." Ben kisses my throat, wet and hungry. He's shifting his hips to find my entrance, rubbing his cock on my thigh and then my slit. He sucks harder on my skin when he finds his mark. "Do you like me?"

It's impossible to move. I nod as I'm impaled, helpless, staring over his shoulder at the ceiling and wincing. I should stop him.

But what if I can't?

He groans, setting to fucking me in earnest. My thighs are tight around his hips and he has very little room to thrust but still finds a way to do it. It's ridiculously hot, even though it shouldn't be. I wish he'd choke me again with his oversized bear paw hands.

I'm not sure what he wants or how he wants it so I dig my nails into his thin T-shirt and kiss the sharp edge of his jaw. I don't want to upset him again. I'm at my quota of tears for the week.

Ben twists at the brush of my lips and our teeth scrape as he kisses me, tongue quickly pushing in my mouth. His mattress squeaks in time with his thrusts, lewd and frankly embarrassing, but he doesn't seem to give a shit about it. He's kissing me all sloppy and hungry and I'm trying not to laugh.

It's not so much that it's funny, but sweet. I don't think Ben has a real mean bone in his body.

He breaks our kiss and smells my hair instead. I close my eyes, intent on the pressure curling inside me and the way every thrust from Ben brings it to the brink. Something about him really does it for me.

"You're getting tighter," he mumbles. His hips press to mine and he grinds into me, panting. "*Really* tight—are you gonna come?"

"Maybe?" I breathe, because I hate when men fucking quiz me on it.

“That’s fucking hot.” Ben shudders and groans in my ear. He’s twitching inside me and I know he’s not going to last much longer. ‘I’m gonna come. Should I stop?’ He hesitates but not for a full second. “Do you want me to stop?”

No, fucking moron. I shake my head and he pauses anyway, leaving me shamelessly squirming on his cock, desperate for release. I’ll kill him.

“Can you pretend you want me to stop?”

It’s such a meek question that I take a second to realize what he’s asking. I swallow and nod, head spinning, arousal throbbing between my legs like a second heartbeat. At the present, it’s the only heartbeat I give a shit about.

Ben doesn’t know what he wants and I’m making it worse. Still, I shake my head to appease him, genuinely pushing against the blanket to escape its confines, and he seems to like it. I guess that’s all that matters during sex.

“I’m gonna come inside you.” He’s panting, trembling; I can hear the excitement in his voice. “You can’t stop me, can you?”

“Please don’t,” I mumble. My hands slide down to his hips and push. “You can’t—”

My prayers are answered as one giant hand wraps around my throat. Ben squeezes and keeps languidly fucking me, big body crushing me into the bed, and I kind of get how ideal he is to play out pretend rape. I’ve never been much into it, but...

He hesitates, grip weakening, then squeezes again. I really should stop him. He’s confused.

“Feels so good,” he groans, “I knew you’d be soft inside.”

All my concerns fade as I climax, still very much being choked by Ben. It’s a good thing we’re home alone because I can’t hold back from moaning his name and gasping and making all sorts of obnoxious noises. He comes almost at the same time with a muffled grunt, ripping the blanket free so he can pound into me.

And I feel the warm rush of his cum and his accompanying guttural groan, relieved. His hips stutter as he empties inside me, leaving that lewd sensation of him, thick and voluminous. It’s a lot of cum. He’s seventeen.

Ben laughs a little into my shoulder. He’s shaking and I realize after a second that I am, too.

“See?” he pants. “Gatorade.”

I nod, swallowing and closing my eyes. “Yeah. Let’s get some and go to bed.”

But he kisses my shoulder and starts moving, hips rolling slowly. I groan and pat the broad span of his ribs. Not this again—I have to clean up.

“Ben,” I say, “we should—”

“There’s more,” he breathes, interrupting me. He kisses the side of my head and shivers. “There’s more.”

“I know but... but we should stop.”

“Don’t you like how my cum feels inside you?”

Yes, it’s hot as fuck, but risky and stupid. I nod because I don’t want a repeat of earlier.

Ben dips his lips to my ear. “Me too. I want to keep filling you up—I like how it feels when it comes out.” He eases in deeper, sucking in a sharp breath through his teeth. “And I can push it back in.”

For whatever reason, the tone of his voice makes my spine prickle. But he’s on the brink already and after a couple more excited thrusts, Ben comes inside me, huffing on my shoulder.

Then he resumes fucking me *again*. He’s still hard and everything and I shake my head.

“It’s okay,” he breathes. Fingers curl around my throat. “I’m not gonna hurt you, baby.”

The way he’s thrusting makes me think he’s trying and failing to be gentle, but I can’t speak with him strangling me. I dig my heels into the mattress and then push them down his calves, coughing.

Our wrestling flashes back to me; how he was way too rough there and how it should’ve been a red flag. It was—is—but I don’t hate what he’s doing. I just don’t want him to leave a mark or accidentally choke me into unconsciousness. I’m sure he doesn’t want to hurt me but he might if he isn’t careful.

“You came back,” Ben whispers in my ear. He nuzzles into the crook of my neck, grip loosening around my throat, letting me breathe. “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

Dizzy, I cling to his hips. He whimpers when he comes, bucking and jerking his release inside me again, but I’m too dazed to care much. He’s so *strong*. Kid is built like a linebacker.

Thunder rumbles the house. Ben pants on my neck and kisses me a couple times before he slips away, promptly making a mess of the bed. It’s sticky, smeared inside my thighs and oozing from my body like an open wound. If I’m being honest, I feel a little used. Dirty.

He lies beside me on his back, then leans up to pull off his shirt. I take the opportunity to get out of bed and take my hundredth shower of the day.

“Hey.”

I glance over my shoulder. Ben is naked and covered in a sheen of sweat, still catching his breath. He looks vulnerable somehow.

His throat bobs. “Are you mad at me?”

“Why would I be mad at you?”

“I dunno.” He runs a hand through his messy black hair. “Did I hurt you?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

I’m not sure yet, really. My throat might be bruised and then, yes, I’ll be mad. But I’m not sure if I want to *be* mad—I don’t know if it’s fair. What’s fair when you’re sleeping with a teenager?

Ben stands, nodding. “Cool, good. Want a Gatorade?”

I open the bathroom door. “Sure.”

“What color? Flavor?”

“...Red?”

He nods again and swipes his shorts off the floor. I shrink as he approaches but it’s just to kiss my cheek before he leaves the bedroom.

I step in the bathroom and slam the door shut behind me. Ok. Time for a deep clean.

Chapter 9

The first thing I do when I'm disentangled from Ben and showered is visit Caroline Waal.

Guilt prompts me to her sunny porch the next morning, ringing her doorbell like giving her hell will make me feel better about what I'm doing with Ben. He's just as much my victim as he is hers but I figure it might help if I protect him from her.

It might help. It won't.

A dog barks within the blue house and feet pad across the floor. I straighten when it opens and see her standing there in green pajamas, a white robe hanging off her shoulders, mug of coffee in her hand. She's tall and blonde like the cheerleaders I used to hate so much in high school.

Caroline sizes me up. "Can I help you?"

"Hi, Caroline. I'm Rey; I live down the street?" I plant a foot in her house. "I'd like to talk about Ben Solo."

Her blue eyes widen and flicker from side to side, searching. She leans out to look around before drawing back inside, shaking her head, swallowing so hard I see her throat bob. Fear.

"Leia's son?" Caroline asks. "What about him?"

"You know what I want to know. What you did."

She keeps shaking her head. Her hands tremble as she pulls her bathrobe tighter.

"You're mistaken," she says. She withdraws and starts shutting the door. "I don't know him."

I shove my shoulder into her door to keep it open, forcing my way into her house. Caroline jerks back a step and her coffee sloshes over the rim of her mug. She curses, eyeing me with abject terror, waving her hand wildly and flinging coffee everywhere.

"Do you know how much you hurt him?!" I hiss. "How traumatized he is?!"

She swears and sets the mug down on a green table near the door. I'm furious—she's not getting away with hurting him.

Caroline scoops up a yapping Pomeranian and angles between me and the door, pushing me out again. She looks around in the same paranoid manner and shoots me a venomous glare. Her lower lip trembles.

"Don't come back on my property or I'm calling the police!" she snaps.

"You hurt a *child*! He's beside himself and it's all your—"

She takes a sharp step out, fury clouding her pretty features. I think she's about to punch me but Caroline just clenches her jaw and gives her porch another sweep with her glacial blue eyes. They shimmer like she's about to cry, selfish bitch she is.

“He’s no child,” she whispers, fierce, scowling. It fades into a quivering lip and a tear rolls down her cheek. “I don’t know what your problem is, *Rey*—but keep that evil beast away from me, and stay off my property. Or else.”

“Evil beast?! He’s seventeen!”

“He’s a monster,” Caroline retorts. Her voice cracks and she doesn’t hold back her tears. My stomach flips. ‘Keep him away from me. I mean it. I told him to stay away from me.’ She shifts her dog on her hip and I recognize the fear in her eyes that I’ve seen before in other victims. “Are you a therapist? What did he tell you?”

I blink, shaking my head. “...No. I’m not a therapist.”

She nods and keeps scanning the street like she’s worried he might appear. Her dog growls.

“Fine. I hope he gets the help he needs.” Caroline nods again as she retreats into her house. “Just keep him away from me.”

That’s all I get. Mrs. Waal closes her door in my face and I’m left standing there in shock. Either she’s a good actress, or Ben isn’t telling me the whole story.

Han gives me a call when I get home and is unperturbed by my visiting his son again. There are more pictures of butchered bodies waiting on my laptop and I just sit and stare at them for half the night. Wondering.

There has to be a reason why Ben’s version of events doesn’t match up with Caroline’s. He’s young. Impressionable. She could be trying to cover up her infidelity by suggesting Ben actually came to her house and really raped her. People can be good liars. Either one of them could be misleading me.

I chew my thumb nail and gaze at a pile of intestines spilled across the forest floor. Who do I want to believe?

• • •

Ben is a busy kid and I don’t find much excuse to visit his house. Leia comes home and resumes pretending to be a doting parent, and I do my best to avoid her, afraid she’ll see the guilt evident on my face.

Poe agrees that we should see other people and I’m relieved to be rid of him. Nice guy, too clingy. Wants more than what I want; that’s for damn sure.

I’m left to my own devices, spending most days staring at my pool and thinking about how fucking stupid I am. I’m supposed to be in witness protection and lying low until the Mutilator is caught, yet I’ve managed to fuck my boss’s son a couple times *and* get involved in his bizarre cul de sac harem.

I should leave this backwards-ass state: move up north where people are less weird. Change of pace, even if it will end up being more of the same.

My doorbell rings as I gaze out the sliding glass door, one week out from sleeping with Ben. I rub my eyes before I get up, clutching my mug of coffee as I shuffle to answer the front door. Supposed to be extra hot today. Maybe I’ll swim.

Ben is standing there when I open the door. He raises his eyebrows and peers over his shoulder before walking inside without bothering to ask permission.

“Excuse—!”

“You didn’t call me.”

I scoff, glaring at his sleeveless basketball jersey and mismatched black shorts. His expression doesn’t change.

“It’s inappropriate,” I snap. My gaze flickers to one of the hidden cameras. “And you have things to do. I didn’t want to be a bother.”

“Yeah?” Ben shuts the door behind him. “Seems like you’re avoiding me, Neem.”

“I’m not *avoiding* you. I’m just trying to give you space to be a kid and have your own life outside of... other things.”

He clenches his jaw and I see a flicker of anger in his dark eyes. It’s odd.

Ben takes a meandering step toward me and I take a big step back. I know what he wants and what he’s going to do and it will be a fucking disaster if it’s caught on camera. We need to get outside, preferably to the pool or the shed. If he puts his hands on me at all then Han will have some questions.

I motion toward the kitchen with my mug. “Okay—let’s go outside. It’s nice and my pool is a mess.”

“Why? Don’t want to fuck me in your bed?”

Jesus. He spits it out with so much vitriol that I recoil, blinking fast. Okay... guess he’s upset.

“Ben,” I repeat, a little gentler. “Let’s go outside.”

“Is *Poe* here?” He leans toward the stairs and cranes his neck, expression contorted angrily. “Did I interrupt something?”

“We ended things a couple days ago. He’s not here.”

“...Oh,” he replies, terse. Ben sets his hands on his hips and runs his tongue inside his cheek to conceal a satisfied smile. “Good.”

I motion again toward the sliding door and he finally follows me out the back. There are more security cameras around the property but if I can get him to the shed then I’m home free. No one can read my lips or witness the inevitable moment when Ben grabs me. I know him by now.

We walk across my lawn to the shed and I pull the door shut behind me. I set my mug on the table and level my gaze with his, strictly business.

“We need to talk,” I say.

Ben slides his arms around my waist and I give him a hard shove. It makes him stagger back a couple steps and a hurt frown passes over his face, genuine confusion marring the very serious issue at hand.

He tries again and I push him again. I raise my eyebrows when his hurt puppy dog eyes morph into a scowl.

"I went to see Missus Waal," I continue.

"Why?" Ben snaps. He clicks his teeth and huffs, folding his arms over his broad chest. "I already told you what happened. Don't you believe me?"

"She had a much different story, Ben."

"So? She's a fucking liar."

"I'm worried that something bad happened. Did something bad happen?"

I'm worried that my initial suspicions were right and that people really are what I immediately assume of them. I'm hoping my gut feeling about Ben is wrong. I'm hoping Mrs. Waal is just protecting her interests and using a teenage boy as a scapegoat.

But Ben's reaction isn't giving me much to hold onto. He's angry and not concealing it well: he paces the small space and runs a stiff hand through his hair, more agitated than I've ever seen him before.

"You don't believe me?" he asks.

"I'm getting two different stories and she was very upset."

He rounds on me, tears in his eyes. What am I *doing*? I shouldn't be questioning him. Would I sit and pick at one of the many female rape victims I met throughout my career? No—I'd leave that nasty business to the prosecutors.

"I did what she told me to do!" Ben hisses. "She told me to... to fuck her no matter what, and I did!"

His lower lip quivers and he turns away, sweeping some tools off the table with a broad swipe of his hand. They smash against the opposite wall and he crouches, knitting his long fingers in his hair and bending his neck. He stays like that for a minute. Takes a deep, shuddering breath.

My heart is racing. I stare at Ben's back and wish I were literally anywhere else right now.

"...Ben," I manage after another pause.

He doesn't respond. His whole body is trembling like he might explode if he moves.

I squeeze past the table and step over a wrench to get in front of him in the cramped shed. His dark eyes track me as I sit on the dirty floor in my green pajamas. His cheeks are streaked with tears from what I can see, because I've once again dug too deep and gotten myself into a lot of trouble.

I offer him a hand. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gone to see her—and I should give you the benefit of the doubt."

"I didn't want to hurt her," he mumbles. His hands loosen and he takes mine in his, tugging me into his lap. "I did what she told me to do."

I'm never going to know one way or the other. Ben is a sweet kid but I think he has a mean streak, and Mrs. Waal could be trying to protect herself by painting him as the aggressor. I eye the door as I wrap my legs around Ben's hips and he hugs me to his chest. I'm really not going to know the complete truth.

He buries his face in my neck, sniffing. "My mom is leaving for a trip tomorrow."

"Look how fast you bounce back."

Ben laughs a little and squeezes me tight enough that it takes my breath. I dig my nails into his back.

"I've been busy doing bullshit all week—I really want to lay around and watch a movie again." Wet lips brush the crook of my neck.

"It's *never* just watching a movie."

"Only because you're so horny, Neem."

I scoff, pushing back to point my finger in his face, and Ben kisses me. He kisses me again when I give him a rough shove and my heart skips a beat as a big hand grabs my jaw, fingers pressing into my cheeks.

He licks his lips. "I'm gonna bend you over the work bench I think."

"...No?"

It's apparently not a question. Ben gets up and shoves me into the table, forcing me to bend over it at the hips so my stomach doesn't get the brunt of the rough edge. I paw at the worn wood and wince. The rattling is a little incriminating, and Ben isn't quiet during sex.

He leans across my back, so heavy that I can't breathe. A hiss sticks in my throat as Ben tugs down my bottoms so they fall in a pool at my ankles.

"Don't bitch," he pants, breath on my ear. His cock strokes between my legs and I stiffen. "You know you want this."

Be that as it may...

He roughly penetrates me, pushing, ignoring the way my body isn't at all ready. I grimace and shake my head and feel a quick pulse of fear—it hurts, and I don't really like it. I need a minute. I'm not seventeen.

The table rattles as Ben forces his cock inside me. He digs his nails into my hip and grunts and I get the feeling that I'm being punished.

"You're gonna come watch a movie with me tomorrow night," he whispers. He slaps my ass and I nod, shivering, pinned between him and the table. "That's right. Now keep your mouth shut."

Somehow the sharp pain makes it feel better. I bite my lower lip until I taste blood and Ben grunts and fucks me violently into the table, skin slapping skin. It's raw and aggressive and there's no hand-wringing or moralizing. It's fucking hot.

He wraps a hand around my throat and squeezes hard, making little black spots dance across my eyes. I arch my lower back to meet his thrusts, desperate for him to fuck me deeper, and he laughs, breathless.

“You like this?” he asks. I nod and it makes him pick up his pace. “Yeah? Want me to come inside you?”

“Ben,” I manage, groaning. *Yes*, but you shouldn’t.

“Shh, shh—I told you to keep your mouth shut, Rey.” He slaps my ass again. Blood pounds in my ears. “So keep your mouth *shut*, or I’m going to fuck your ass instead.”

Jesus Christ. No thanks.

He keeps pounding into me for another minute before he comes. I’m not shocked when he doesn’t pull out and can’t help but enjoy the sensation of his cock twitching inside me, and the deep satisfied groaning, and his excited jerky thrusts as he finishes. He cups my ass and squeezes, hips pressing flush against me.

Ben pants into my hair. He straightens behind me but doesn’t move away and pushes me down when I try standing up. Cum drips down my inner thighs.

“I’m not done with you,” he rasps. Fingertips trace my spine to my tailbone, creeping around my hip.

Rough fingers fumble through my lips, and I shiver, squirming on his cock. Ben roams until he finds my clit and he pushes down too hard at first, but lightens when I snap a curse. Overeager—all men are so fucking overeager.

He strokes gently and I start moving. Soon he’s draped across my back again, quiet, like he’s listening to my soft whimpers. Tension builds up and I gaze at the door through hooded eyes. Probably wouldn’t even stop if someone walked in.

“You’re getting tight again,” Ben whispers in my ear, reverent. He’s thrusting his hips ever so slightly. “Twitching. Feels really nice.”

“Gonna come,” I mumble.

“Yeah?” He kisses my temple, still rolling his middle finger around my clit. I lean on my tiptoes. ‘Yeah, you are. I can feel it.’ A hand slides over my hip and he fucks me a bit faster, thumb rubbing circles into my skin. “Me too. I’m gonna come inside you again.”

I tumble over the edge, bucking against Ben’s fingertips, ignoring the sharp pain from the edge of the table. He holds my hips in both hands and his breaths quicken in my ear.

“I love you.”

Cold fear blooms in my belly as soon as the words leave my mouth. My eyes widen, tongue settling on the last syllable. Oh no. What the fuck—

Ben, being Ben, latches onto it. He swallows and presses his thumbs in my lower back, nodding.

“Me too,” he breathes. ‘I love you, too.’ He laughs a little and kisses my temple. “Feels good to say it out loud. I love you, too.”

Horried, I just lay there and stare at the door until he climaxes. He groans and kisses my hair and keeps mumbling it: I love you, I love you, I love you. Breathless, excited. His voice wavers and cracks.

“It’s nice to hear someone say it—especially you.” He slips free of my body but doesn’t stand, still pinning me to the table, face hidden in my hair. He inhales deep. “I love you so much, Rey.”

Oh *shit*.

Chapter 10

“Hey—Hey. Neem.”

Soft cash register beeps echo around me as I pick through the family planning section at CVS. My fingers tremble as I pick the last box of Plan B, trying my best to ignore Ben giggling at vibrating dick rings. Oh God. I told this stupid kid I *love* him.

It’s incriminating as fuck but I want him to see how goddamn expensive the morning after pill is so he doesn’t turn on the waterworks when I tell him to wear a condom. And we need to discuss my Freudian slip, which I’m hoping will be easier in public.

I slap a vibrating ring from his hand and shove the box in his face instead.

“It’s not *cheap*,” I hiss. “Sixty bucks!”

Ben scoffs as he takes the box, then raises his eyebrows. “Wow, that’s a lot of money for one pill.” He shakes it. “You take birth control so what does it matter?”

“You’re—young, which means it’s easier for something bad to happen.” I snatch the box and brush past him, irritated. “I’m not taking any risks.”

“Wait!”

I turn and see him holding the ring again. He grabs a bottle of fifteen dollar lube and follows me, hugging his things to his chest when I try slapping them away.

“For later,” he says, then bursts out laughing at my angry snarl.

“Put that *back*!”

“C’mon, the box says it’s *pleasurable*.” Ben seizes my forearm and yanks me toward him, smiling. I shrink a little. “We should try new things.”

Ugh. I give a couple paranoid glances around before heading for the pharmacy to cash out. Fine. I’m not buying it.

The cashier gives us a weird look and I give her an acidic glare. What? Never seen a young guy with an older woman? Ring up my shit and mind your own fucking business.

Ben whistles while she scans my Plan B. I tap my credit card on the counter and huff before snatching the lube from his arms. Silicone-based. Fine. I’ll need it to keep him from giving me an infection with the lack of foreplay. I toss it on the counter, pause, and take the cock ring from him, too.

I rip up the receipt as we leave the store and hope no one noticed anything. Han didn’t send an escort since I had Ben with me but obviously there will be questions if he finds out I have a bag of sex crap that I bought with his *son*.

We step outside into the sunshine. Ben chews his gum and I glare up at him as I slip on my shades.

“So,” he says. “Lunch?”

We don’t get lunch.

Instead, determined to ruin my life as well as his, I drive to a Walmart parking lot and jump Ben in the back seat. No feelings are discussed.

The threat of being caught makes it even hotter than usual and I forget for a couple minutes that I need to have a frank discussion with him about the nature of our relationship. He’s *hot*—really hot, and it’s even hot when he tries to convince me that we shouldn’t use a condom.

Ben nips my throat, pushing his hands up my sides. They’re so big that his fingers cross over my back.

“You haven’t taken the pill yet,” he whispers, voice deep and husky and hungry. “Just one more time. I wanna come inside you—just one more time.”

The back seat of my SUV is cramped and uncomfortable but I have nowhere else to fuck Ben until he mother goes on her trip. Just my basement, which is creepy, and the shed, which is... dirty.

I’m pulling my jeans off and straddling his lap, struggling to find the bag with the condoms in it. He grasps his cock in one hand and gives me a sharp tug with the other, angling me toward him, rubbing the head through my slit. God, if he gives me a fucking second I can at least get the lube—

“Ben,” I hiss, “hang on.”

“Shh, shh. It’s okay—I’m just gonna come inside you one more time—”

The blunt, sticky tip of his cock pushes in, maybe an inch, and I jerk back. It hurts. I’m still sore from the shed and I know I shouldn’t be doing this at all, but every time I look at him I’m confronted with what I’ve done. I even told the poor kid I love him.

Do I? It’s not possible. It’s *ridiculous*.

Ben stifles my squirming and keeps mumbling ‘it’s okay’ as he impales me on his length. My legs tremble and I consider really fighting it but I kind of don’t want to. I haven’t taken the pill yet. One more time won’t hurt; it won’t make a huge difference.

He paws at my hips until he’s fully inside me. It aches and stretches and I suck in a breath at the sensation. Fuck. It feels so fucking good being skin-to-skin with another person in the most intimate possible way.

Warmth skitters across my neck where Ben is breathing, shifting into guttural groans as he guides me along his cock. He kisses my neck and bites, squeezing my ass before he slaps hard. Hurts. I dig my nails into his chest, a warning, but he doesn’t really care.

I wonder, vaguely, if this counts as rape. The thought wanders through my mind unbidden while Ben fucks into me, having once again not waited when I told him to *and* not bothered to use a condom. I still want it and want him—and I don’t feel like I’m being assaulted—so I figure it doesn’t quite count.

Legally, I'm the rapist.

"Can I come in your mouth?" he asks, breathless.

"No—absolutely not." I brush aside my concerns and glance out the back window, eyes peeled for anyone hanging around. "No."

Ben huffs. He pushes up my shirt and bra and dips his mouth to my chest, blindly kissing and sucking, rolling my hips in his lap. I shiver when his lips brush my nipple and promptly suck, wet and warm and rhythmic. He heaves a contented sigh.

It's weird. I shove him back into the seat by his chest and he gives me an acidic glare.

"What?" he snaps.

"Don't... do that."

"Why?" Ben grabs my jaw, pulling me in and forcing me to meet his eyes. "Do we only do what *you* want to do, Rey?"

Ugh. I look around one more time before I take off my shirt and bra, adding them to the pile of clothes on the seat next to us. Ben hums as he resumes mouthing my tits while he fucks me. Fine. I'm just not sucking his dick.

...

Finn comes to visit Ben the next day, which keeps him occupied until Leia leaves. I'm left to my own devices: dusting, skimming my pool, and watching the news.

Around nightfall Finn walks home and Ben comes to my front door dripping pool water. I give Han the same excuse about Leia asking me to keep an eye on him, and Han doesn't seem to care. I've never given him a reason not to trust me.

Ben shakes water from his hair as I shut my front door and turn the lock. Crickets chirp from the bushes. The air is all thick and still, pure miserable humidity and heat. I hate Louisiana.

"Mom will be back Sunday morning," he says. He brightens when I hand him the CVS bag with the lube and cock ring.

"Great." I cross my arms as we walk down the steps. "Seems like she's never home."

"She's not. Neither was dad."

Whoop. I immediately regret bringing it up and hope to god he doesn't launch into a sad story.

But he doesn't. Ben squints across the street at one of the other matching houses and walks alongside me to his own, and he doesn't say anything else. Poor kid. Neither of his parents has any time for him.

I clear my throat once we're inside the safety of his camera-less house. "So what movie are we watching? *Reservoir Dogs*? *Fargo*?"

Ben laughs and tosses the CVS bag on the hall table. I pick it up on my way past as I follow him out to the kitchen, where he has some snacks out. I'm not risking forgetting it

there and Leia stumbling upon it. She'll lose her goddamn mind.

"I got *Zootopia*," Ben says. He opens the fridge and ducks inside, I hear a snap, and he offers me a can of Coke. "I hate those movies like *Reservoir Dogs*. So bloody and gross."

"Really? A teenage boy who hates bloody and gross movies? Are you okay?"

He smiles, shrugging. Ben is a gentle kid—and I think he soaks up all the negativity and violence around him like a sponge. Now that I've fucked him a couple times, I know how he wrings himself out.

We munch on chips and pizza rolls before making our way out to the living room for the grand viewing. Ben goes upstairs to take a quick shower and I'm left sitting on the couch waiting for him.

It's quiet. I glance out the window and notice rain tapping lightly on the glass. Didn't know it was supposed to rain tonight.

The longer I stare, the heavier my eyes get. I rub them and yawn, concerned I'm going to fall asleep before Ben gets back downstairs and disappoint him. He likes this kind of crap. The least I can do is stay conscious and pretend to like the movie.

Maybe it's the sound of the rain and the way the light dances on the floor, but I'm—

Chapter 11

It's been a long time since I last had a dream.

But I weave through different memories while I'm unconscious, twisting through the painful times as a kid wandering the streets alone, picking through garbage cans for food. I drift to the Academy, the first place I truly belonged—where I finally found a warm, safe place to sleep.

And I swirl around the bright spots for a time. All my nightmares involving intestines and glassy dead eyes seem miles away when I'm bathing in the warm glow of my graduation, and the first case I solved with Han, and the satisfaction of crime being punished.

Because I think, one way or another—cynical as I may be—that there is a glimmer of hope in any situation.

It sticks to my mind as my eyes flutter open in a familiar place, warm, lying on my stomach. My head pounds and I wince as I roll onto my back in Ben's messy bed. Sunshine streams through the window and casts light across the sheets but doesn't reach the bedroom door.

Realization pounds in my skull like a drum: I've been drugged. Ben drugged me.

I groan, struggling to sit up and get the fuck home. Glimmer of hope, glimmer of hope. He's just a lonely kid who needs an outlet. If I talk to him like I *should* then we can figure it out together. I won't leave him to flounder alone in the deep dark parts of his psyche.

He's just a kid. I can protect him.

I'm halfway upright and slowly regaining awareness of my body when the bedroom door cracks open. Panting, dizzy, I hastily try to cover my bare chest with the comforter but hear soft, chastising clicks of a tongue. It's languid. Bored.

"You should lay down, Neem. You're a little pale."

I blink the watery haze from my eyes and see Ben stepping into the room, shirtless, only wearing a pair of flannel red pajama pants. He smiles as he shuts the door.

Don't confront him directly. Just get out of the house and call his mother. Or Han. Even if they find out about us—well, it doesn't matter. Ben *drugged* me. It shouldn't matter if we had consensual sex a couple times. They'll believe me. He could be doing much worse things than drugging women.

I watch him circle his bed and sit near my feet. Ben clasps his hands between his knees and stares back at me for a long minute, unblinking but still smiling. It makes my hair stand on end.

My gaze wanders along the sheets to my own lap, then trails up my arms to my chest. My breasts are covered in deep purple bruises—hickies or bites from Ben being too rough while I

was unconscious. Thinking about it makes me sick; I ignore the insistent pain blooming between my legs, too.

But realization still crawls up the nape of my neck, and I break out in a cold sweat. Ben raped me.

It's like being bitten by a new puppy. My instinct is to punch him in the fucking face but I still don't see that cold impassive look in his eyes that they *all* have. I don't want to hurt him. I don't want this to be the reality that I've been fighting to avoid. I don't want my cynicism to be right—and my insistence on giving him the benefit of the doubt to be so wrong.

Ben gently grasps my foot, still under the blanket. He squeezes lightly.

"Want a Gatorade?" he asks.

I slowly shake my head. Clammy sweat slicks my palms clinging to the comforter, a fine tremor building in my legs. My thighs feel sticky.

He pouts his lower lip. "No? You mad at me?"

"I've—I have work to do at home." I avoid his eyes. They're a little too human. "I'll just go back. I'll call you after I shower."

How do I broach the subject with his parents? I'll have to admit to the affair, too. People will know what I did—I'll lose my job and everything I've worked so hard for, and Ben probably won't do more than a year in prison. If he gets any time at all.

He keeps smiling, pushing his hand up my ankle and calf, grip tight. My throat constricts.

"You're shaking," he murmurs. "You sick or something?"

"Medication... side effect." I swallow a lump. "I've got to go home and call my boss, Ben. He's probably wondering where I've been."

"You mean my dad?"

Shit. I try to feign ignorance and shake my head but Ben just smiles and nods. Son of a bitch.

He stands, heaving a sigh, and ambles to his dresser. My gaze flickers to the door and I scramble out of bed to make a break for it—

"If you leave, I'm telling him everything, Rey."

I hesitate. Toes curl on the cold floor and I turn to look at Ben, who's busy fiddling with something on top of his dresser. He casts me a bored glance over his shoulder and nods toward the bed.

"Sit," he says.

"Ben—"

He rolls his eyes and picks up his phone. My life flashes before my eyes: everything I'll lose, everything I've worked so hard to achieve. I start to teeter from the room but the thought of losing my job and living on the street again, with the added weight of stigma from fucking Ben...

I pad across the floor and sit stiffly on the edge of his bed. It isn't like he's going to kill me.

Ben sets his phone down and I notice what he's been playing with: a row of pocket knives, each different, all opened and shiny from being polished.

He picks up a small one on the end. "Dad gets me one of these every couple years. Don't have much opportunity to use them, but..."

"Are you threatening me?"

"...No?" Ben laughs, condescending, shaking his head. He closes the knife and snaps it open again. "Just something for when we fool around. Jesus. You're always so *dark*."

I keep glaring into his dark eyes as he meanders in front of me, idly opening and closing the knife. I'm naked and sore and I just want to run.

He flicks the blade open. "I love you, y'know—that's why I'm giving you a choice."

The tip prods the divot of my collarbone. I could disarm him and run the fuck home, but then he'll tell his parents and trap me in litigious hell.

But there's no way I'm the only person he's ever done this to, and my earliest suspicions about him come creeping back. The Mutilator uses shallow stabs—lots of them. It would fit a pocket knife, and Ben went to that camp near Kisatchie where he could've slipped away...

Ben draws the tip of the knife along my clavicle. "You can go if you want. Leave me." He digs the blade in lightly, not enough to draw blood. "Or: you can stay, and no one will know anything."

"...Have you ever hurt anyone, Ben?" I keep my gaze level with his, even though it hurts. "Besides me."

"Ah ah." He sweeps his wrist and slashes a shallow cut across my collarbone. I hiss in pain, recoiling. "There's a very specific way this is going to work, and *you* aren't allowed to ask questions. Either you're mine—or you aren't."

"I'm not going to pretend none of this happened," I snap, clutching the cut. It burns. "You drugged me! You—you—"

The flat part of the blade pushes under my chin, forcing me to look up at Ben. His smile is gone.

"Either you're mine," he repeats, 'or you aren't.' He raises his eyebrows, searching my face. "If you love me, it shouldn't be hard to trust me."

I'm not being afforded any time to think. He's going to tell Han and Leia that we've been sleeping together if I walk out, but there's something else wrong here, and if I don't walk out and sacrifice my career and my entire *life*, I'm letting crime go unpunished.

Is he the Mutilator? Is Ben capable of killing and flaying women? Will he ever be brought to justice if I spill the truth to Han, or is the evidence too scant?

My heart thunders. He's dragging me in with him; making me complicit. If I don't turn and walk away now then it's just going to get worse and worse—but I can keep my job, which is

the only thing I've ever had. And I can keep him. Maybe I can fix the damage I've done. Maybe he really is just a scared, lonely kid.

"Will—Will it just be us?" I croak. "No one else, right? Just us?"

Some of the ice recedes. Ben smiles again and nods, which is somewhat of a relief. If he's hurting anyone else, I hope this means he'll stop.

I can work the case from the inside this way, too: collect evidence, then wait for the right time to strike. Maybe I'll be considered under duress when I report it to Han, and I won't have to go to prison.

I glance at the bedroom door. "And you won't tell anyone?"

"Of course not." He crouches in front of me, shifting dramatically to the clingy kid I'm used to. "So you still love me? Even this part of me?"

"I... I..."

Ben kneels and arches forward like a cat, burying his face in my stomach. He kisses a trail up and climbs up as I'm forced to bow back until I'm lying flat.

"It's gonna be okay," he whispers. Fingertips trace my collarbone to the cut, smearing blood. 'I just wanted to make sure you really love me. People are more honest when they're scared.' He nuzzles my temple and I squeeze my eyes shut, shuddering. "Isn't that right, Detective Kenobi?"

Ice prickles down my spine. This isn't worth it. What's the use in keeping my career if I have to play games with a psychopath to maintain it? At least if I tell Han I can go to sleep with a clear conscience.

He knows my real name. There's only one way Ben could know my real name.

I'm going to call Han and give him purely anecdotal evidence from the handful of times I slept with his son—that's gonna go over well. He'll tell me to take a hike. I won't be allowed anywhere near Ben and can never find enough evidence to clear my name. I'll lose my job, lose my house, lose *everything*.

Or... I keep playing along and picking up what I can. If my hunch is correct and Ben is the Mutilator, he's going to slip up sooner or later. All that anger and aggression needs somewhere to go. But if he isn't, and I make the accusation without proof, I can say goodbye to the FBI.

It's a zero-sum game that I'm going to lose either way. Holy shit. There's no way out.

"It's gonna be okay," Ben repeats. His hand wanders down, pushing his pants, keeping me pinned with his heavy upper body. "We have each other, Kira. And we have trust—" He shifts forward and I squirm, panicking, bed squeaking. "And we have love."

I suck in a sharp, pained breath through my teeth as his cock penetrates me, tearing open all the raw wounds. He groans into my neck and gives a rough thrust, grabbing the other end of the mattress to anchor himself as he settles his hips against mine. I'm too shocked to be angry.

When he leaves me lying there after he's done, I stare at the ceiling for a while before sitting up. I get to my feet, knees wobbling, and check my phone on the dresser. I'm telling Han. I have to tell Han.

There's a single text waiting for me.

Han

Kira. We got him.

We caught the Mutilator.